

**The historicity of generation:
uncertainties of Meru
age-class formation in central
Kenya**

Mark Lamont

Ph.D. Thesis
University of Edinburgh 2004

Declaration

I declare that the work presented in this thesis has been produced by myself.

Thesis Abstract

This is an historical ethnography about age-class formation among the people known as the Imenti and Tigania Meru of central Kenya. By reexamining social anthropology's long standing study of societies with age-sets and age-organisation, this research focuses on the problem of historical perspective which such forms of social organisation inevitably provoke. Ethnographers writing in the 1990s, like their counterparts in the 1950s, seemed convinced that the contingent, uncertain, and often *ad hoc* nature of age-class formation meant that such forms of social organisation were fated to disappear. This thesis aims to overturn such an assumption by presenting differing ethnographic contexts where debate about age-classes' viability in the present led to community-wide reappraisals of traditional and modern categories of thought and action.

By the time of fieldwork in 2001-2003, the formation of Meru age-classes fed into intense debates about what constituted 'tradition' and an authentic construction of local social identity. Research in two fieldsites, Imenti and Tigania, allowed for comparison between one segment of the Meru where such organisation is seen as defunct and another section where it is vicariously implicated in local politics. Age-classes, it is argued in the Meru context, are both social formations and tropes within the makings of a local political imaginary. National concerns such as the 2002 General Elections could be locally reinterpreted as power struggles between the generations, such that the transfer of power at the state level was likened to generational succession, a pressing local issue which was still left unresolved when the author left Kenya. Such debates also surfaced in the controversies of differing styles of traditional and modern male circumcision, mirroring a similar debate about clitoridectomy which has come and gone since at least the 1930s. The thesis also examines the uses of Kîmerû - the local language - in literacy programmes, where debates and arguments about traditional and modern categories of thought were inscribed within a wider construction of culturally entangled moralities. Examinations of how Meru's vernacular modernity required a familiar vocabulary to express itself, drawn from tradition, was made through examining forms of popular music. In the 1990s, gospel music sung in the vernacular drew upon the language and imagery of age-classes and generations in applying them to typically modern problems of alienation and anomie.

Research was also focused on showing how the historical contexts of migration and education were and continue to be implicated in the uncertain formation of age-classes, rather than spell out their demise as predicted by modernisation theory.

The ethnographic materials presented in this thesis suggest several arguments about contemporary social theory. By detailing the social and political situations through which age-classes entered into debates about tradition and modernity, local concepts of age and generation were critical to making a political imaginary 'about' tradition from 'within' modernity. This is important because it forces anthropologists to reconsider age-classes as a 'traditional' category of thought and arena for action and refocus on how they are the sites of multiple historical and cultural entanglements. A further break from structural-functionalist models of age-class formation and a reexamination of the uncertainties and contingencies which actors face in attempting to form them has allowed, at least, to critically reappraise the concepts of 'society' and 'culture' respectively. The focus on uncertainty allows the thesis to look at 'society' as a community of argument and 'culture' as an arena of interpretation.

Acknowledgements

Although authored by a single person, this thesis is actually the outcome of a long, drawn-out collaborative effort. Of course, all misinterpretations and gaffes are my own. In Kenya, Bw. Kaaria of the Ministry of Science, Education & Technology not only issued the necessary research permit for me to begin work, but also taught me a great deal about who 'owns' the state. Staff at the Kenya National Archives also assisted me to sort through the mass of papers collected there. The Institute of Development Studies, University of Nairobi graciously accepted me as a research affiliate and their administrator's expedient actions saved the day on a number of occasions. Not least, however, I'd like to thank some very special people back in Meru, for guiding me in the arts of remaining *nthoni* (respectful): Mutuma and Rosemary Angaine, Paul Goldsmith and Bi Safia, Edward Mutethia, Kendi, Muriuki, David Maingi, Kaunga, Damaris Kagwiria, Paulo Ratanya, David Mutura, Patrick Mugambi, Mrs. Mwilaria and all the staff at Mikinduri Girls School. For the funds to carry out this research, I acknowledge the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for their financial commitments to my doctoral training and field research costs. At Edinburgh, my supervisor, Charles Jedrej warned me off particularly clumsy arguments and kept a sense of humour throughout the project. My thanks also go to Thomas Blom Hansen who wasn't afraid to call me an 's-f' (structural-functionalist), provoking me to examine my theoretical persuasions more critically. Closer to home, I'd like to thank Elizabeth Ndindi for her patience and understanding during my long absences, both in the field and outside of it.

Thesis Chapters

INTRODUCTION	1
Meru in its regional context	1
From Thôûci to Mûtuatî: the geography of Meru	9
Fieldwork at the centre of the world	17
Research methodologies and fieldsites	20
In publica res: the chapters in review	28
 CHAPTER ONE	
Age and generation in the Kenyan political imagination	33
Age and generation in the Kenyan political imagination	33
Age-class and generational 'systems': state-of-play, or states of decay?	45
Beyond enteleych: historicity within the ethnographic present	62
 CHAPTER TWO	
Communities of Argument: uncertainties of Meru age-class formation	69
The great debate? Meru idioms of change and transition	69
<i>Nthukî</i> : historicising selves and subjectivities	73
' <i>Batîgania</i> ': circumcision and the ceremonial context of debate	79
Forced circumcisions: authenticity and discipline in question	86
Genealogical and social generations compared	93
Comparing Imenti and Tigania age-class formation	95
Talking about cutting: explaining circumcision sets	105
Historicising age-class names: an anthropological debate	113
 CHAPTER THREE	
The Generations Return: Meru rhetorics of history	119
Everyone's past is different: ' <i>Kila mtu ana zamani yake</i> '	121
Three lifetimes: situating the problem of historical perspective	127
Key words and the rhetoric of historical knowledge	140
History and metahistory in central Kenyan communities	148
 CHAPTER FOUR	
Rivalries and Curses: the enigma of succession in historical perspective	155
'Who is in power?'	155
Rivalries and curses: the spectre of succession in Tigania and Igembe	160
<i>Ntwiko</i> : generational succession, history, and memory	167
Renovating the <i>njuri nceke</i> in Imenti	178
Enforcing tradition: the <i>njuri nceke</i> 's efforts to regulate circumcision	185
Making modern men: the state, capital and the <i>njuri nceke</i>	191
 CHAPTER FIVE	
Looking for Work: labour migration and accumulation	199
<i>Gûcwa Ngûgi</i> : ballads of the unemployed and homesick	199
From 'Native Reserve' to 'labour reserve': Meru on the move	206
<i>Bûrukû</i> : interstitial categories of person in Nyambene during the 1940s	214

Giithû valley: a case study	222
CHAPTER SIX	
'Our gaarû is the School': education and youth	230
A brief history of schooling in Meru District (c. 1911 - 1991)	236
No more additions!: mitigating the problem of 'over-aging' in the 1970s	243
The incorporation of educational calendars into age-class formation	249
Cutting words: NGO education against female excision in the 1990s	257
CHAPTER SEVEN	
You Don't Know Without Being Told: religion, moral crises and the local press	268
Identity and morality in Meru ideals of personhood	268
'You Don't Know Without Being Told'	278
Imenti modernity and life in the subjunctive	295
CHAPTER EIGHT	
With Bells on Their Ears: allegories of a last generation	302
Central Kenyan prophesies of the 'last' generation	302
<i>Nthukî ncabûka</i> , or, the 'bad' generation	315
Lip-synch gospel: recording artists as social critics	322
Exegesis and allegorical interpretation in Meru	332
Epilogue:	
'When the Dust Settles': Historicity and uncertainty	335
Appendix A	
Kîmerû and Kiswahili Glossary	346
Appendix B	
Map of Meru Central and Meru North Fieldsites (2001-2003)	351
Appendix C	
Administrative Map of Meru, post-1990	352
Appendix D	
Satellite Imagery of Mount Kenya and the Nyambene Range	353
Bibliography	354

List of Maps, Figures, and Plates

Maps

Map 1:	The Republic of Kenya, political map of districts and provinces	8
Map 2:	The Historic 'Meru District'	10

Figures

Figure 1:	The Moi Succession, East African Standard, 09-11-01	42
Figure 2:	Imenti age-class formation, 1875? - 1976	103
Figure 3:	Tigania and Igembe age-classes in living memory	108
Figure 4:	Tigania and Igembe <i>nthukî</i> and their nicknames, 1918 - 1991	115
Figure 5:	Today's Girl: FPAK pamphlet on 'Female Genital Mutilation' (1997)	261
Figure 6:	The Bad Generation: <i>nthukî ncabûka</i> represented in Nyaga's Customs and Traditions of the Meru (1997)	321

Plates

Plate 1:	Talking with Grandparents, Gîcînini, Kangeta (2001)	21
Plate 2:	Imenti boys awaiting their circumcision, 1949-1950	83
Plates 3 & 4:	Still frames from Martin and Osa Johnson's filming of the Tigania assembly of warrior <i>lamalla</i> ['ingala ilamal', 1928?]	89
Plate 5:	Alternate generations: grandparents and grandchildren (2001)	130
Plate 6:	Adjacent generation: a social 'father' in mid-life (2001)	130
Plate 7:	Bakari and Nkatha: studio portrait of Miriti, ' <i>nthukî trabûta</i> '	138
Plate 8:	Njuri Nceke pose for a photograph, Muringene, Igembe (1998)	163
Plate 9:	Tigania elder with markings of njuri kîamotha (1949)	184
Plate 10:	M'Ncebere worked in Nairobi in the 1920s (2001)	209
Plate 11:	An 'under-aged' Igembe youth and his uninitiated contemporaries (the latter wear school uniforms) (Muringene, 2001)	245
Plate 12:	Extension made to a house for an initiate, Imenti (2002)	256
Plate 13:	'Traditional' circumcisor and elder (mûtaani), Kangeta (2002)	256
Plate 14:	Joy Adamson's representation of women's life-course from uninitiated <i>nkenye</i> to elder <i>nkirote</i> , (Chuka, 1950)	265
Plate 15:	The composure of children, Muringene, Igembe (1998)	269
Plate 16:	Children dancing at Independent Church gathering, Igembe (1998)	273

INTRODUCTION

Meru in its regional context

This is a historical ethnography about age-class formation among the people known as the Imenti and Tigania Meru of central Kenya. Although not one of Kenya's most celebrated peoples - the Maasai and Gikuyu spring to mind instead - the cultural history of the Meru has continued to fascinate and frustrate foreign scholars for a long time. Although the first Europeans to write 'scholarly' works about the Meru were colonial administrators and Christian missionaries, a number of historians and anthropologists continued field research among Kîmerû-speaking populations in the four decades since Kenya's political independence in 1963. In many ways, this thesis aims to build upon such research, noting ethnographic disagreements where relevant, in order to contribute modestly to the theoretical literature about East African age-class and generational 'systems.' A broader goal is to compare concepts about generation in such a way that this thesis demonstrates their relevance to contemporary anthropological and historical theory. With respect to Meru experiences of social change, I approach the telling of local history as a problem which requires an understanding of how Meru have organised themselves into categories based on age and generation.

Much of this thesis explores the tensions between the ethnographic present of my fieldwork from 2001-2003 and the historicity of generational time experienced by all ages of living men and women. I do this, principally, through privileging an historical method and perspective on why both popular and academic opinion strongly suggest that age-class formation is an anachronistic feature of 'traditional' society. In contrast to these predominant views, I aim to demonstrate that far from

being an historical vestige of a life long surpassed by decades of ‘modernisation’, the formation of age-classes in Meru is implicated in the longer-term construction of a vernacular modernity. Debate among Meru about the contemporary and past meanings of their age-classes and, by extension, the historical experiences of each generation is an important element in redefining ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ categories of thought and practice. In short, this thesis aims to demonstrate that generation and age-classes are integral components in the telling of local history and its evaluation in moral and political terms.

Written documentation of Meru history began scarcely a century ago. The first mention of the Meru in European literature only dates back to 1896, with the publication of William-Astor Chanler’s travelogue *Through Jungle and Desert: Travels in East Africa*. The American cartographer and ‘explorer’ did not know the peoples of the Nyambene Ranges as the ‘Meru’, but referred to the various territorial sections of this ‘tribe’, for examples, as the Embe (Igembe) and the Daitcho (Thaicû). Coinage of the ‘tribal’ and ethnic name Meru came a decade later, when British imperial ambitions, swollen by the costs of building the trans-East African railroad, coveted political ownership over the densely populated slopes of what is now known as Mount Kenya. In the same year of the imperial conquest, 1908, the first mention of the Meru (‘the Mweru’) appeared in the anthropological journal *Man*, a curious historical coincidence (Dundas 1908: 135-9).

But I leave this earlier historical prelude aside for the moment, partly because evidence for Meru histories and history can be gleaned from other scholars’ works, but mainly due to the fact that this thesis deals with living people. Today, there are no more elders who would have remembered the earliest imperial decades. The majority of the oldest men and women who are still alive today came of age sometime in the

1930s. And even these people are very few in contrast with a largely youthful population, the majority of whom were born in the 1970s and 1980s when Kenya's population expanded dramatically. As such, the kind of history related to me was often a living history, told within the historical horizons of the generations alive at the time of fieldwork.

Taken together, the population of the Meru was approximately 1 728 520 persons according to the 1999 national census. The first methodological census of 1948 enumerated the Meru population to be 312 560 (Peatrik 1999: 500). Whereas recent talk about demographics in Kenya centres on there being too many people, at the time when the country's oldest citizens were children this talk was about there being too few (cf. Kuczynski 1949; Lambert 1941). To say that the Meru population was depressed in the immediate decades following the 1908 conquest, and imposition of the *Pax Britannica*, is probably both an understatement and an unknown, judging by the flimsy archival records on such matters. Nonetheless, in 1920-1921, colonial officials estimated that there were about 112 668 persons in the district, based upon their tax collectors and hut counters' reports. Although it is highly circumspect, in 1911, an estimate was made which placed the Meru population at 216 736 persons (KNA: PC MRU 1/1). Despite scanty attention to the health and welfare of African populations in the first decades of colonial rule, later administrative reports from Meru tell of declining standards of health and food security in the aftermath of conquest which, according to at least one drought combined with an outbreak of influenza and measles in 1918, 'decimated' the population (KNA: PC MRU 1/2). Small-pox, chicken-pox, yaws, and some venereal diseases combined with the influenza and measles infections to depopulate the region. The eldest people alive today recall that their parent's generation suffered high mortality. Their parents were

known as the “ones with the pockmarked faces” by a number of contemporary elders. I heard stories about whole communities being quarantined in these early, unhealthy days of colonialism. Other sources recalled that compounds were abandoned to the hyenas, and houses left to decay and collapse, before the quarantines would be lifted. It is possible that tens of thousands of people died from disease and starvation in the decade which followed the imperial conquest, a pattern observed for most central Kenyan populations of the late nineteenth century (cf. Dawson 1981). Yet, in contrast, there is anecdotal evidence that precolonial populations were expanding prior to the moment of conquest. In 1892, Chanler (1896: 156) noted that agricultural Igembe pioneers were clearing forest in the vicinity of Laare, in the northeastern foothills of the Nyambene Range, one of Meru’s two principal geographic features. Just months before the declaration of the *Pax Britannica*, another early traveller to Meru, Colonel John Patterson (1909), noted that the population of central Tigania was robust, a sharp contrast to the sparsely-populated parts of northeastern Kenya where he had spent months traversing.

One possible reason why the population of Kimeru-speakers was stable, if not growing, during this period is owed to the social geography of the region. Meru is today very different than it was in the late nineteenth century. From a distance, however, its physical landscape appears very much as it would have when Chanler approached the Nyambene Range from the arid northwest savanna in 1892. Several authors, impressed by the sight of this mountain range shimmering dull-blue above the dry and hot savanna, have described the Nyambene Range as an island. There is more to this metaphor than apt description, however, because this area was significant to inter-regional trade and provided a temporary haven for hungry trading parties, depleted of their pack animals and porters. Nyambene is like Yves Droz’s (1999)

description of nearby Laikipia District as a kind of 'vertical archipelago', islands of people living and producing in narrow, vertical bands between cold, unproductive alpine and hot, barren savanna. But the horizontal space of the Nyambene Range may also fit into this island metaphor (Bernard 1979: 264). Situated in a hub of a complex network of caravan trade, Nyambene was vital to the continuation of Arab, Pashtun, European, Ndorobo, Somali, Galla, Rendille, and Kamba exchange during the imperial period (cf. Ambler 1988). Although Meru traders participated in the last boom of the ivory trade (Arkwell-Hardwick 1903), their economic strength lay in food provision and the capacity to produce enough staple crops that these populations could absorb newcomers in times of crisis elsewhere.

In their regional context, Kîmerû-speaking populations interacted extensively with their Maasai, Samburu, Galla and Rendille neighbours to the northwest, as well as exploiting a chain of economic and social relations to their southeast among related peoples such as the Tharaka, Chuka, Embu and Kamba. When the Laikipiak Maasai sections fissioned in the 1880s, the outcome of internecine struggle and resistance to British imperialism, several hundreds escaped to parts of what is now Meru. Today, there are significant numbers of lineages among the Tigania Meru, especially in Kianjai and Mûthaara, who quietly note their Maasai descent, although shun attempts to exaggerate their status as 'outsider' clans (cf. Mahner 1975). In the more northern sections of the Igembe, intermarriage and inter-ethnic clan affiliation between Igembe Meru and Rendille was pronounced. The first colonial District Commissioner, Edward Butler Horne, noted in 1911 that large numbers of Igembe elders had physical characteristics easily recognised among the camel-herding Rendille of the arid north, although they were 'Bantu' speakers. In the late 1930s, the DC of Meru District requested that Rendille elders in Marsabit revoke a curse upon the Njia wa Mwendwa

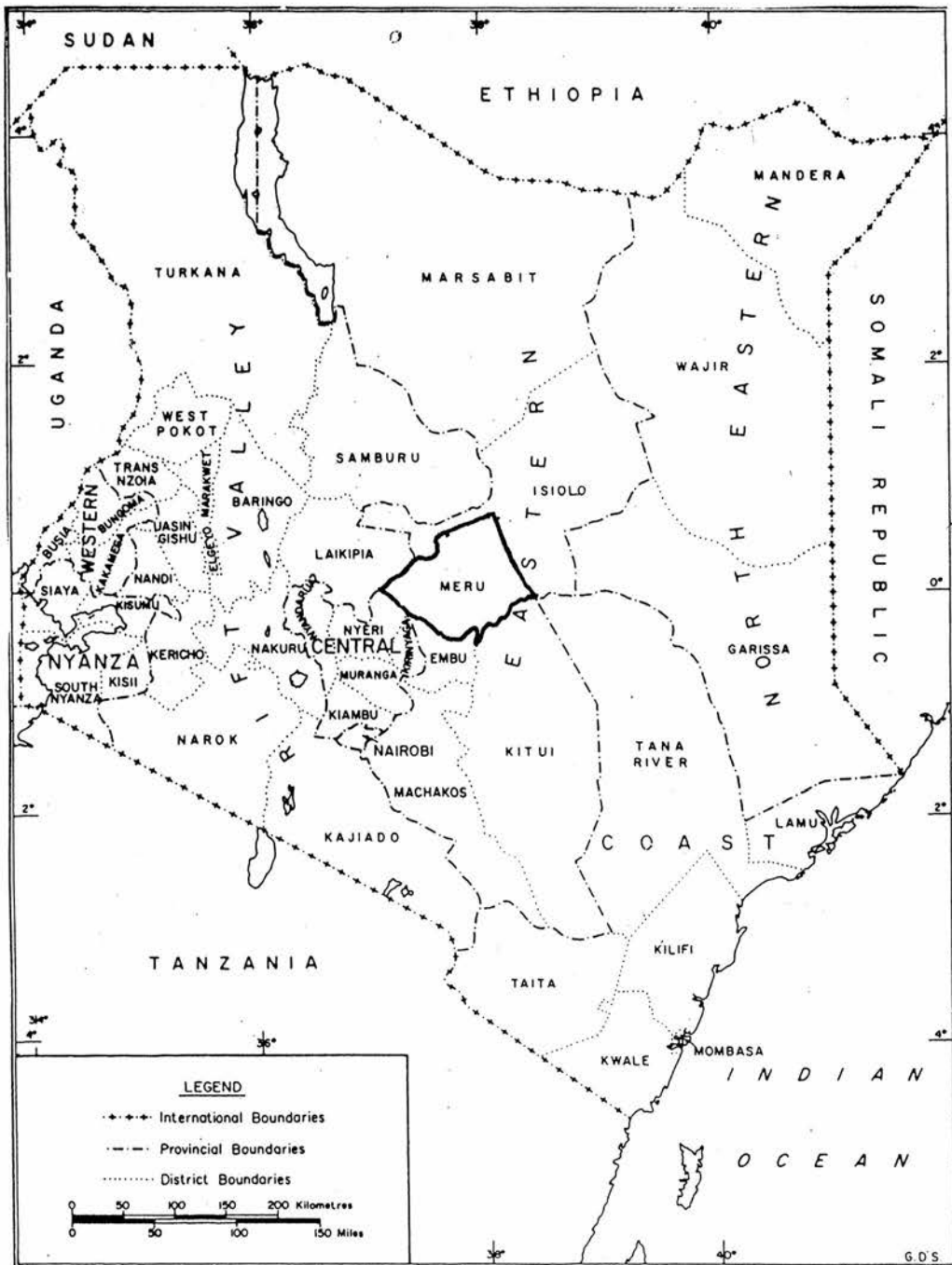
section of the Igembe. This curse was initially pronounced in 1919 for an attack upon a Rendille trading party by Igembe warriors bound by an inter-ethnic clan affiliation known as *gícíaro* (adoption). In the early precolonial accounts of travel to the Nyambene Range, there is considerable evidence that migration, intermarriage, and cultural hybridity were features of social life in the region (Arkwell-Hardwick 1903; Chanler 1896; Patterson 1909). Patterson describes a Galla-speaking porter conversing with a Tigania Meru woman who was the daughter of a Rendille couple the porter knew. Arkwell-Hardwick describes stock partnerships between Somali merchants and Tigania herders based on local exchange conventions. A powerful Múthaara man, M'Iminuiki ('Dominuki'), appears in all the published travelogues, and eventually assisted the first DC to navigate the difficult challenge of setting up British administration and rule. There is partial evidence that he, or his father, was a Laikipiak *oloibonok* ('seer, diviner') who had immigrated to Tigania following the disintegration of their status within his former Maasai community (Ambler 1995: 237). As such, precolonial Meru populations, with their agricultural potential, tended towards the incorporation of 'outsiders' from other communities who would, in time, become Meruised.

One of the processes through which 'outsiders' became Meru was incorporation into local age-classes. The formation of well-defined age-classes, opened and closed every eight agricultural seasons or about four to five years, allowed the children of newcomers to become Meru over a single generation. Another feature of Meru social organisation which they shared with many of their northerly pastoral counterparts was an institution of clan affiliations, known as *gícíaro* in Kímerû, which were often organised across ethnic boundaries such that social identity was considerably fluid (cf. Schlee 1989). Age-class 'systems' such as those found amongst

many of the pastoral, agro-pastoral, and agricultural peoples of East Africa are often formed in a regional context as described above, such that movement between groups and a distinctive cultural hybridity was probably more pronounced than that reported in colonial era ethnography.

The orientation of the Meru to the north was so pronounced that it shadowed their relations to the similarly agricultural peoples to their south and southeast. Among the Tigania, whose plains provided adequate pasturage, great value was placed upon raising herds of cattle, reflecting an agro-pastoral ideal more like that of their northern neighbours than their Meru counterparts further up the southeastern mountain slopes. It is significant to Meru's cultural history that they are the most northern of all the so-called Thagicû Bantu of central Kenya, a linguistic category which includes speakers of Kîemba, Kîkamba, Kîmbeere, and Gîkuyu. Despite close economic and social ties between the Meru and their northern neighbours, successive colonial administrations largely considered the Meru as a sub-group of a wider 'Gîkuyu' community, a colonial 'social fact' hotly disputed by politically active Meru during the same period.

Geographically, the peoples who were to become the 'Meru' were certainly not remote from other social formations during the precolonial period. Regional patterns of precolonial trade and social interaction were eroded during the early period of colonial rule (1908-1939), exacerbated particularly by the formal 'closing' of the north and its declaration as a no man's land. Ambiguously labelled the 'Northern Frontier Province', a buffer zone between the agricultural development of Kenya Colony and the pastoral north was created which cut Meru off from socio-economic ties which had been in formation for centuries. The highland-savanna interface, once busy with the traffic of people, animals, and trade goods, effectively ceased to be an



Map 1: The Republic of Kenya, political map of districts and provinces

opportune location for future 'symbiotic' relations between the agricultural Meru and the northern pastoralists.¹ For the Meru, this closure of the north produced a kind of spatial isolation from the rest of central Kenya which subsequently impoverished the region as well as earning its inhabitants an indelible and derogatory reputation for backwardness. In being constantly compared to the 'more advanced tribes', in which was meant the Gĩkuyu, Meru's loss of their former geographic flexibility under colonialism translated into a struggle to maintain their political particularity, a struggle which was achieved by accepting the tribal categories of the colonial order (cf. Maupeu 1990).

From Thûûci to Mûtuatî: the geography of Meru

When asked about its size, many Meru say, "*Kuuma Thûûci Mwanka Mûtuatî*", 'From Thûûci to Mûtuatî.' Thûûci is the name of a large river in the southeastern border with Embu District (now Runyenjes District) and Mûtuatî is a market town in the very northern extent of the Nyambene hills. Today, by fast public service vehicles, such a trip 'from Thûûci to Mûtuatî' would take about three hours, provided the speed was in excess of 80 k.p.h. The 'historic' Meru District measured 8673 square kilometres; about the size of Puerto Rico (Bernard 1972: 15). About a third of this land area was unpopulated because of harsh aridity or human and animal disease vectors. Unlike other communities in central Kenya and the Rift Valley, where lands were alienated from Africans by European settlers, the Meru actually saw an increase in their territories under colonialism. Beginning with political agitation and a

¹ On the relevance of the concept of 'symbiosis' in Kenya's northern region, see Paul Spencer's (1970) *Nomads in Alliance: Symbiosis and Growth among the Rendille and Samburu of Kenya*. For a more recent application of this concept to the Meru of the Nyambene Range, see Paul Goldsmith (1994).

several thousand square kilometres. Although the borders of this district remained much the same as they had during colonialism, clashes over land in the late 1980s and early 1990s prompted the Government of Kenya to redraw the district boundaries and cut Meru District into manageable and policeable administrative units. It has since been divided into the four smaller administrative districts of Meru South, Meru Central, Meru North, and Tharaka-Nithi. The Kîmerû-speaking groups living in these districts are distinguished by further territorial and linguistic sub-groupings from the southern portions of the region to the north: Chuka, Mwimbi, Igoji, Miutine, Imenti, Tigania, and Igembe. The related Tharaka and Thaîcû peoples were considered Meru by the colonial administration despite strong debates among the more northern communities that “they are not Meru”, an attitude of exclusion also extended, in some cases, to the Chuka. The fieldwork for this thesis was carried out in Meru Central and Meru North, the most populated areas of the former larger district peopled by the three largest sub-groups of Meru: the Imenti, Tigania, and Igembe.

As these are the northern and eastern Meru, my concern here is to describe in rough form the geographical setting of the fieldwork undertaken from 2001-2003. This area is dominated by the imposing, craggy peaks of Mount Kenya to the south and the rising massif of the Nyambene Range which runs northeast from Mount Kenya. On a clear morning, Mount Kenya may be seen from any southernly faced vantage point. Mount Kenya, a volcanic plug from the Tertiary period, is some 5194 metres high. This is the second highest peak on the African continent. In Kîmerû, the mountain is known as Kîrimara, which literally means the ‘shining mountain’ and is synonymous with the Kîkuyu name Kirinyaga. Mount Kenya’s glacial caps and particularly sharp contours are often rendered into symbols of Kenyan nationalism: from the planting of the new flag of the Republic on its peak in 1963 to celebrate political independence

from Britain; to the label of 'White Cap', a popular brand of lager beer celebrating nothing in particular. Nyambene's most striking feature is the crest of montane forest at its peak, Itiene, shrouded in cool mist and cloud at 2499 metres above sea level. Between the two features lies a lowland plain of semi-arid foothills which are invisible from a northwesterly approach. This is northwestern Tigania, traditionally an agropastoral and militant stronghold of the Meru in the nineteenth century. Almost every single precolonial approach to the Nyambene Range was cut from the northwest through these rolling plains. As one goes further north and northwest, this plain becomes particularly inhospitable, an unchanging texture of lava boulders covered by a thin canopy of spindly, thorned acacia. In the rise and fall of this plain, where cattle were seasonally grazed, lie a chain of numerous volcanic craters, the largest of them, Ngombe, the best source of saline soils in this part of Kenya. The only Meru group to domesticate donkeys, the northern Igembe exploited these salt deposits as a resource within the extensive networks of precolonial trade. Although hundreds of small craters dot this ancient volcanic landscape, it is the mountains which define the region.

These mountains are central to the cosmography or ethnogeography of the Meru peoples themselves. The Nyambene Range and the plains to its northwest are the 'traditional' territories of the Igembe (in the northern Nyambene hills) and the Tigania (in the plains and eastern flanks of the Nyambene massif). The forested eastern slopes of Mount Kenya have been cleared by generations of Imenti agriculturalists and today cultivation extends high up into the plateaux separating montane and alpine zones. At this altitude, tea does particularly well, where one can find vivid green tea plantations and factories cut into former forests of deciduous trees. Although there is economic exploitation of the upper reaches of both mountains, to each of these groups of people, their respective mountains are of spiritual and

symbolic significance. These impressive landscapes enter into specific religious practices which continue within the formal Christianity and Islam of today's population. The Igembe and Tigania often bury their dead with their heads facing Nyambene and the Imenti do a similar thing with respect to Kîrimara (Mount Kenya). This is significant because burial is a practice of fairly recent innovation, the first of such mortuary rites taking place in the late 1930s. Each of these mountains are the site of several sacred lakes where rain-making rituals are periodically undertaken. Despite being shrouded in secrecy, partially out of fear of being labelled superstitious or backwards, such rain-making rituals say much about the cosmography of the Meru as an agricultural people acutely aware of the climato-spiritual link between mountains, forests, lakes, rivers, winds, and rain.

Sufficient rainfall is central to the relative successes of all central Kenyan peoples practicing agriculture, agro-pastoralism and - of course - industry, commerce and wage labour. Neither crops nor light bulbs will flourish in a drought. For a people specialising in agricultural production, Meru is fortunate for being generally well-watered, although there are severe annual discrepancies in the amount and duration of rainfall throughout the region. The climate of Meru shifts seasonally with the presence of rain-bearing winds associated with the interior forest climates of Uganda and the maritime winds of the Indian Ocean and its littoral. Of a strictly geographic nature, the mountainous terrain contributes to the differences in annual rainfall measurements. While the south and southeastern mountain slopes may receive an annual mean rainfall of some 1270-2286 millimetres, the east and northern lowlands of the region may only receive as little as 381-1016 millimetres on average (Bernard 1972: 19). The presence of a defined rainshadow in the eastern and northern parts of the region mean that agriculture is severely restricted in the lowlands, despite increased migration into less

hospitable, arid land by poorer highlanders since the 1980s (cf. Goldsmith 1994). This sharp dichotomy between high-rainfall and fertile highland and arid and barren lowland does not mean, however, that there is no variability in the length and quality of rains in even the most desirable farmland. Like most of East Africa, central Kenya is susceptible to extreme variability of rainfall from year to year and the spectre of drought and famine is palpable every fourth to fifth agricultural year. An elaborate oral record of former famines is a principal element of any person's biography.

In years with adequate rainfall, however, several ecological zones within Meru may be described as yielding a twelve month growing season. Although there are many Kîmerû concepts for the coming and going of seasons, these being implicated in the ceremonial and social calendar of the Meru, there are essentially two rainy seasons. These periods of rain are of differing length and intensity, usually interspersed by months of dry, hot weather. Both cycles of the annual season can be pleasant, heavy rain and hot sun, but too much of one and too little of another is always considered to be bad news. For example, rain is a blessing, but too much rainfall, such that it smashes new crops before they are mature, is a definite bane. Each season is associated with a realm of meanings and practices which are rarely replicated year to year, due to the unpredictability of rainfall. The word for a season, *kiingo*, is a basic unit of time in which to organise the agricultural and social calendars. The rains known as *ûthima*, approximately from mid-April to the end of June, are associated with the production of several varieties of staple cereals such as beans, and tubers such as sweet potatoes. After the intense agricultural activity of these rains, also called the 'short rains' in English, a brief but very cool, even cold, season in July (*mpio*) gives way to drier and warmer weather until the end of September. This dry period is called *thaano* and was, until very recently, a critical period in the annual cycle for initiation

ceremonies and other attendant rites associated with age-class formation. Typically, food resources are in decline by the middle of the next growing season, called *ûrugura*, with rains falling in mid-October and lasting until December. This is the main season for growing the most important food crop, maize, and failed harvests of this planting are a serious threat to remaining food stocks. These rains are usually intense, although longer in duration, hence, their English name as the ‘long rains.’ Transportation in this season is severely hampered by mud and the collapse of critical infrastructure around rivers and tributaries such as bridges and culverts. By early January, however, temperatures swell for approximately two months in a dry, hot, and dusty season known locally as *thaano nceke*, the ‘thin dry season.’ During this period of time, there are significant bottlenecks in the availability of labour, often presenting challenges to farmers wishing to harvest their maize, millet, and sorghum before their crops are eaten ‘on the cob’ by feeding birds.

Besides this description of agrarian patterns in Meru, several crops grown by local farmers are perennial. Cassava, for example, is a drought resistant crop and is considered by some highlanders as a ‘famine food’, even though it is readily consumed on a daily or weekly basis by many lowland farmers. Preserved maize, ground into meal and cooked as *ugali* (Swa., corn porridge) is the preferred food staple of highland farmers and urban workers. Where there is sufficient water and natural drainage, *catha edulis*, or *miraa*, a tree whose young, succulent shoots are chewed for their natural amphetimines, is harvested twice a month, twelve months of the year. Some of the oldest *miraa* trees, called *mbaine*, may be some two hundred and fifty years old, testifying to the historical place of this important crop in Meru social life (cf. Carrier 2003; Goldsmith 1994). Marriage proposals, personal covenants, and bond partnerships are often negotiated by gifts of *miraa*. This tree crop contributes

considerably to farm incomes in the Nyambenes, Igembe and Tigania, despite the generalised inequalities in how these incomes are distributed (Peatrik 1999: 23). The globalisation of *miraa* marketing, following the Somali and Ethiopian diasporas in the early 1990s, has put the local *miraa* industry under increased production. *Miraa* from Nyambene reaches illicit and legal markets in London, Amsterdam, Toronto and New York on flights which leave daily from Wilson Airport in Nairobi. Tea is also a perennial which is restricted to higher elevations abutting onto forest clearances. Unlike other cash crops grown by Meru farmers, tea production has generally been well remunerated and protected by sound marketing policies. Coffee, once a mainstay of the Meru economy, has recently been devalued owing to global overproduction, recent economic liberalisation, and the disorganisation of Kenya's internal cooperative marketing regime. Once considered synonymous with the social identity of 'modern' Imenti Meru, coffee is now largely despised and thousands of farmers have cut back or uprooted their trees (cf. Lamont 1999). *Miraa* has now replaced coffee as Meru's 'wonder' crop, although significant challenges to its sustainability as a base for agricultural development have been present since at least the early 1990s. The tragedy of agricultural production lies in the uncertainty of profit and the whims, tastes, and buying power of remote outside consumers. Perennial food crops, despite their low market values, offer some buffer against this commonly perceived injustice. "You can't eat coffee", say many Meru farmers embittered by their pitiable incomes from the crop, but cassava, yams, tea, and *miraa* come are "something in the hand" which can earn a shilling or shore up hunger.

This brief geographic preface to the Meru, however, does little to introduce how local people interact with their landscape as a site imbued with meanings. In the following section, I shift from the problem of situating the Meru field sites by

reference to geography, and turn to how these landscapes are lived in, as situations and moments spatially constituting the lifeworld of the Meru.

Fieldwork at the centre of the world

The landscape of central Tigania can be surveyed from a number of hilltops. Once during a walking tour, my hosts and guides took me to a steep ridge not far from Mikinduri market. This was Rwerea, towering above the Thanantû river as it meanders through the Tigania landscape. On two flanks of the ridge lay conspicuous groves of indigenous trees. Known as *kîthiiri*, these sheltered groves house local elders' councils, where older men occasionally gather as *njuri nceke*, a 'select' council which is respectfully feared for their secretive palaver. On this occasion we had been following the trail of ritual processions associated with a defunct ceremonial office, that of the *mûkîama*, and this had led us up to Rwerea's promontory so that the path of the procession could be traced out onto the landscape before us. In other parts of Meru, such as central Imenti, the *mûkîama* was known as the *mûgwe* (literally, the 'one') and a controversial ethnography was written on this office in the 1950s just before its ceremonial importance waned (Bernardi 1959). One of my Tigania companions hotly contested that any mortal man could be called the *mûgwe*, stating for my clarification, "There is only one *mûgwe* and that's God" ('*arî mûgwe ûmwe, nî Murungu*'). As we stood on the back of Rwerea debating the correct title for the rainmakers, I was suddenly aware of the power of the landscape before us in evoking conversation about the deep history of the Meru.

Behind us to the north rose the forest-green shadow of Nyambene. On its flank, evidence of recent cultivation into the forest, the sun's reflection on tin roofs

and cleared ground, could be seen many kilometres away. In front of us, to the east, lay the heavily deforested Thûr'î, a mountainside marked by its prominent inselbergs and precipices. In the hazy distance, silhouettes rose up from lowland Tharaka, sharp mountain peaks standing like sentinels upon the expansive horizon. The more erudite storytellers I met had an explanation for the heterogeneity of Meru's landscapes. Meru mythology held that a rainbow-dragon, the *nkunga*, had crashed into the earth, churning up the hills and valleys which Kîmerû speaking peoples called home. Its eye lay as a lake in upper Imenti, its massive body the Nyambene hills, and its tail the montane-flatland contrast of lower Tharaka.

Pointing towards a heavily wooded bend in the river below, M'Kaunga - one of the elders leading our small entourage - described how the rainmaker would disappear into the water and re-emerge at another spot of the river several kilometres away. He spoke of a tunnel which connected the sites and described how the *mûkîama* vanished into a cloud of smoke. These were early days for me in central Tigania and I found such stories incredulous. After living among the Imenti of Meru Town during 1991, 1998, and 2001, who conceive of themselves as 'modern' Kenyans, the vicarious difference of the Tigania imagination forced me to accept that I had to adjust to new ways of thinking and acting once again. In that moment on Rwerea I thought about Latin American novels I had read years earlier, in which magic realism temporarily suspends disbelief when angels fall from the sky and it rains rose petals.

A younger member of our *ad hoc* procession, some six persons in total, casually told me how Rwerea had been scientifically proven to be the centre of the world. The equator, he gestured, ran beneath us. To bolster his claim, he said that satellite images had been mapped out to discern that this spot was indeed the geometric centering of our common world. When I winced in protest, he continued his

argument, “Ah, but is it not written in the Bible that Canaan had seven hills and many valleys?” There were, in his estimation, seven hills in central Tigania and we were made to count out seven larger hills on the vista. This statement reflected back upon localised Christian themes that Meru was a land of ‘milk and honey’, which predominantly followed from the Methodist translation of the Bible in the early 1930s (“*nthû îjî îkuunukara îria na naincû*”). In the early 1990s, when the anthropologist Paul Goldsmith conducted his fieldwork in Nyambene, he wrote of doing fieldwork in the New Canaan, as some Christians refer to the area (Goldsmith 1994). Latterly, while carrying out a similar walking tour along ritual paths, this time to the sacred lake deep inside the Nyambene forest, my guide proudly showed me where the prophet Abraham had slept while “on his trek to Egypt.” Such imaginary connections to the Biblical traditions appropriated a sense of importance, even claiming the ultimate importance of being the centre of the world.

As I overcame the seeming impossibility of people’s claim that Tigania and Rwerea, in particular, were the center of the world, a new possibility filled its place. What was being argued was a rather more relative and intersubjective claim. The outside world, that of strangers and far away peoples, lay beyond a horizon which, far from being seamless, was actually porous and volatile, rendering it dangerous and threatening to ideas about subjectivity and self-sufficiency.²

Throughout fieldwork, I gradually accepted the reasons why quite large numbers of local people frequently made ethnocentric claims about the originality and universality of their social life and its values. Although it is difficult, today, to find persons who have not had experience of the world beyond, as an outcome of travel or

² Michael Jackson makes a similarly existential observation about Kuranko ideas about ritual items which come from outside. See *Minima Ethnographica: Intersubjectivity and the Anthropological Project* (Jackson 1998).

communications, it is understandable that people construct their identity and sense of belonging as if they were, indeed, living at the center of the world. The outside world, often no more than the urban world of the nearest town, is that unknown and uncertain periphery from where disease, enemies, and misfortunes originate. The archaic Kîmerû word for a foreigner is the same word for an enemy (*maitha*); the word for a guest is the same for someone strange (*mûgenî*). My extreme interest in Kîmerû as a foreigner, at the onset, was frequently taken as a kind of proof that Meru had much to offer the outside world. Such opinions also did much to gainsay the dominating view of outsiders that the Meru were some kind of backwards people who refused to fully accept development. Perhaps this kind of ethnocentrism was a response to the actual decentering of the Meru lifeworld, a defence against the vicissitudes of their twentieth century history, where the 'mere centre could not hold' and like Chinua Achebe's parallel world 'things fall apart.' A considerable element of discussion in this thesis stems from a local argument that Meru 'culture' is inherently purer than the forced hybridity and confusion of colonial and postcolonial entanglements. By imagining Rwerea as the centrifugal point of their world, some of my Meru hosts sought to challenge the cultural privilege which I undoubtedly represented to them. Over the fourteen months I spent in the Nyambene Range, in the company of my hosts, I had to partially conform to this ethnocentrism and learn to re-centre my world.

Research methodologies and fieldsites

This thesis is based on fieldwork in Meru Central and Meru North from January 2001 to April 2003. I spent approximately half of this time in each fieldsite.

In central Imenti (Meru Central), I concerned myself with the lives of the people of two locations just north of Meru Town, Chûgû and Mûnithû, although I felt free to establish contacts wherever I met them. In Meru North, I rented a Land Rover and roamed throughout the Nyambenes, although most of my research was done in central and eastern Tigania, especially Mikinduri, Gîithû, Mûciîmûkûrû, and Kunatî. While in Meru North, I was placed voluntarily by the local authority in a girls' secondary school, as a part-time teacher of social sciences. This position had the advantage of managing my 'outsider' status. The job provided me with an alibi and an easily recognisable identity that I believe assisted me to settle into a community reputed for being parochial and suspicious of foreigners. Although I had envisioned spending more time in Igembe, further north than Tigania, I was compelled to make only brief visits and was not able to establish myself there in 2001-2003.

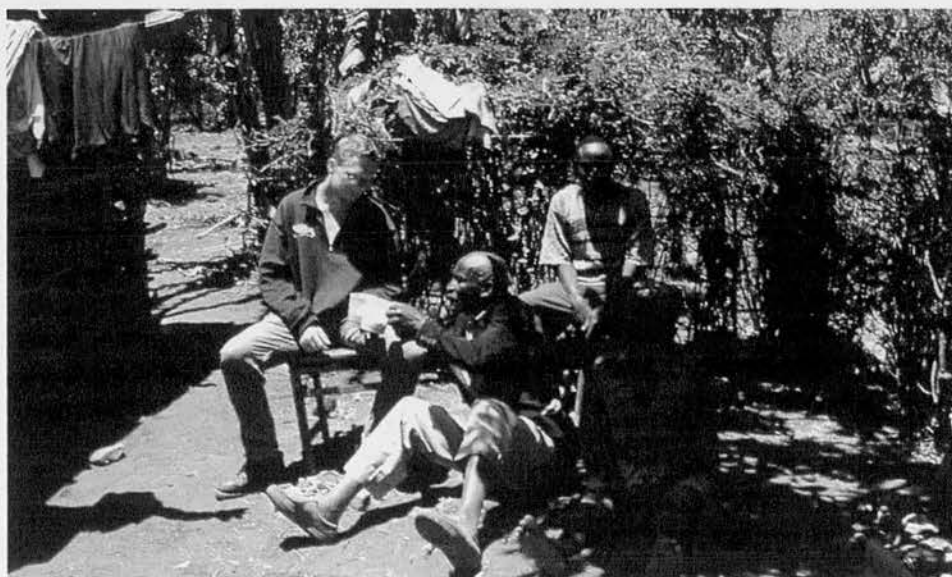


Plate 1: Talking with Grandparents, Gîcînini, Kangeta (2001)

Prior to this period of research, I had spent time in central Meru in 1991 teaching at a local school and carried out nine months of fieldwork in 1998 on the local coffee industry which culminated in a MA thesis (Lamont 1999). The familiarity with social life among the Imenti allowed me to begin my research activities almost immediately upon arriving in Meru Town in early 2001. With the assistance of several young friends I originally met in 1998, Mutethia, Muriuki and Kendi, we set about organising semi-structured interviews and biographies among people selected because they belonged to a specific age-class. The intention behind these initial contacts was to compile a representative social biography of different age cohorts. This was largely effective, but these collective biographies were by no means free of contradictions nor debate, an observation which is articulated by some of the chapters in this thesis.

Although I liked my friends' help, I found my secondary position in the research process to be socially claustrophobic and constraining. Fieldwork of the kind which I undertook is often limited by working through paid 'research assistants' and I strove for some semblance of independence wherever possible. I often learned more when alone and in casual settings with local people where my awkward language use was graciously tolerated. Despite the initial necessity of setting down a specific methodology, my fieldwork was most effective when I cut loose from my established research agenda and experimented with the use of my time. Above all, however, it was the degree of participation in both fieldsites which taught me the most about social life in Meru and provided me with the basic ethnographic information required to narrow my research problems further. Besides working on compiling the social biography of all present and past age-classes or generations, I busied myself with learning about genealogies and kinship terms; attended numerous ceremonies implicated in the life-course such as children's naming parties, circumcisions, weddings, and funerals;

learned about farming, species typology, weather, the seasons, and livestock; as well as familiarising myself with the daily use of time and space. Where these kinds of information do not explicitly appear in this thesis, they are nonetheless part of the general background to much of what is written here.

Local patterns of age and gender based avoidance also contributed to the kinds of information, views, and understandings presented in this thesis. The intimacy between alternate generations, that of grandparents and their grandchildren, meant that many of my most revealing fieldwork encounters were with people who were my classificatory grandparents. As such, out of 127 interviews conducted on age-class formation, some 64 of these were with men and women over the age of sixty. Because there is a generalised pattern of social avoidance between adjacent generations, that is between parents and children, only 25 sessions from this age-group were achieved. Whereas with older persons, the views of both men and women were roughly equally represented, noticeably, I had less than 10 completed biographic or interview sessions with women who would be classified as my social 'mothers.' These were also only possible through the assistance of Kendi and Kagwerîa, two young women who I relied upon when researching women's lives and subjectivities. This is a methodological fact which accounts for some of the biases in this thesis towards the views and experiences of men. The remaining interviews, some 38, were done with youths and, in some cases, children. Again, here, the majority of those I spoke with were male, although I had a number of close female age-mates who volunteered their perspectives when asked. Not all of these interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated for detailed textual analysis and comparison, but I have written records for those where I either did not have the appropriate equipment or where they occurred spontaneously in the course of another activity.

These interviews also differed significantly in their attention to biographical details. I was particularly interested in gathering specific information on peoples' experiences with childhood, initiation, marriage, employment, migration, schooling, health, parenthood, land use, property relations, succession and legal disputes. In a broader vein, I also asked about social changes which had occurred in people's lives. This often related to demographic, political, and economic transformations which were documented in the archival records, but in just as many cases, individual histories revealed the silences and gaps in such records. I consider my own fieldnotes to be a valuable archive in their own right, largely because they contain references to experiences which appear nowhere else. Although this thesis, in part, aims to adequately represent the subaltern status of many Meru under differing political regimes, it has proven a grave challenge to retain the phenomenological quality of fieldwork encounters, where views and experiences were always rendered as part of an intersubjective dialogue. Where biography was concerned, the colonial legacy of race and racism was always an element in the discussions between a 'white' European and a 'black' African, no matter our personal experiences or non-experiences with colonialism. Where persons consulted were too aged or too young to recall 'critical events' in their lives, these sessions tended towards anecdote and the formal direction of the interview encounter was dropped to accommodate for a much looser situation. In some other cases, however, I returned to particular individuals and compiled enough biographical data to create detailed and comprehensive life histories. Some people found my interest in biography to be somewhat therapeutic, while others were more guarded about their personal histories and spoke instead about other people such as their neighbours, spouses, parents, children, or age-mates. In contrast to my 1998 research, nobody refused to see me, although on several occasions scheduling meetings

proved impossible, a situation I acceptingly put down as a polite refusal. I tried to select individuals after I had already met them once or twice, but in some cases more gregarious people offered their time and tutelage spontaneously and freely.

In my spare time, I focused on advancing my command of Swahili, a language spoken widely throughout East Africa. Although Swahili is less than ideal for carrying out research among the Meru because it is associated with the government (*therikali*) and ‘outsiders’, it is much easier to learn and speak than the morphophonemically complex language of Kîmerû. After almost thirty months of fieldwork in northern and central Meru, dialectical differences aside, I managed to speak Kîmerû arduously and understand most dialogue. At times, however, because I relied on the Kîmerû translation of the Bible, as my source for grammatical structure, I would provoke riotous laughter at some of the ridiculous statements I would make. I could not convince some people that I was not a missionary. People also used to joke that I had a Gikuyu accent because my tongue was too heavy and breathy. With these linguistic difficulties, I communicated in whatever language was appropriate, whether English, Swahili, or Kîmerû, and took a pragmatic approach to each situation, preferring to listen on some occasions and speak at others. With time, transcription of recorded interviews and biographies, as well as songs and other forms of oral artistry became easier to do alone, although I frequently relied on proofreading and translation help from a variety of persons. All errors in translation, of course, are my own.

The reason for carrying out research in two fieldsites was comparative. Although the Tigania and Imenti share broad similarities in their age-class and generational ‘systems’, there are also significant differences in their organisation. In a broader sense, the Imenti and Tigania also have had distinctive histories before and after the colonial conquest. I was intrigued by the question of why age-classes

appeared defunct among the Imenti, while they were vicariously maintained among the Tigania and Igembe to the north. Admittedly, in the field, I had a rather positivist sense of purpose about this question, collecting broadly 'demographic' data about fertility, morbidity, mortality, and birth spacing to account for where I thought the answer would be found. I was heavily influenced by the theoretical application of demographics to the analysis of age-class and generational 'systems' laid out by anthropologists such as Anne-Marie Peatrik (1995, 1999), Paul Spencer (1980) and, to some theoretical extent, Frank Stewart (1977). This approach soon proved to be unpalatable in terms of local etiquette and my research acquired a sharper historical bent, especially in the later stages of fieldwork among the Tigania where questions about 'population' were regarded with suspicion.

In both areas, however, the existence of age-classes was implicated in local patterns of political debate. The ethnographic treatment of key political debates in Meru is critical to the overall argument of the thesis. By the time I moved to Mikinduri in January 2002, a small marketing and administrative centre for central and eastern Tigania, I was hoping to observe and perhaps participate in a 'planned' inauguration of a new age-class, that of the young cohort of adolescents touted to be called the *Gĩcungĩ*. More exciting, however, was the chance to witness the ritual contexts of an anticipated generational succession between two senior adjacent age-classes in the Nyambene hills. I had expected the advancement of the 'junior elders' of the Lubeeta and the retirement of the 'fathers of the country' of the Ratanya. By the end of fourteen months living in the Nyambene Range, I came to the conclusion that such an 'event' had either occurred and I missed it, or that it was not an 'event' as such, but a process, occurring over a much longer time frame than thirty months of fieldwork would allow. The Tigania fieldwork features more prominently in this thesis

than that of the period where I researched the Imenti, although I have made every effort possible to compare the two fieldsites where it has been relevant to my overall argument.

My research methodologies would best be described as multi-pronged. As I was principally interested in understanding the shifting historical subjectivities of different generations, I stressed collecting biographies from representatives of each of the successive age-classes and their spouses. Biographies and life histories present the researcher with considerable interpretive difficulties about the nature of chronology in historical research. To give just a single example, when asking when an elder woman married, she replied “*tîrîo ncacadamo cîenjire*” (‘wasn’t it [when we were] pricked by needles’). Here, she was implying that her cohort began marrying about the time when vaccinations were administered by syringe. I knew of no medical facilities in operation in the Nyambene Ranges, besides the Methodist Hospital in Maua, during the period of time this woman would have been of marriageable age. Although her birth-date of *Kiaramûû* - the famine and influenza epidemic of 1918-1919 which decimated her community - is understood because it is traceable in the colonial archives, a programme of vaccination trials in Imenti probably during the late 1930s is not even entered into the annals, leaving doubt and speculation about the precise date. Archives were frequently called upon to determine when a particular event or process was said to have occurred. Unfortunately, this historical approach was often unsatisfactory. Often, when an event was remembered by an elder, it was not reported in the governmental or personal archives available. Inversely, an event the archives stressed at length was often not found to be remembered by those old enough to have experienced it. The most frequent problem, however, was that my respondents did not use a system of calendrical years, but referred to incidents such as an auspicious

initiation, a famine, or a personal event which were contemporaneous with a given year. The example given above, the coincidence of birth with a renowned famine, *Kĩaramũũ*, is a typical response of this kind. Indeed, in their population census of 1999, local enumerators drew up a chronology based on the succession of age-class recruitment and memorable events such as famines or political crises to assist them to estimate the age of those born before the advent of birth registers and identification cards. Age-classes featured as a template for such a chronology, not only for Meru, but for dozens of communities across the Republic. Most people under the age of about fifty, however, use calendrical years with varying degrees of accuracy. I spent an inordinate amount of time attempting to cross-reference approximate years given for an event. Ironically, once I had established a detailed chronology of the kind given by elders, I found that this was a more accurate method to follow than when given specific years or historical references. I have chosen not to suggest that the 'Western' calendar introduces distortion in the telling of Meru history, particularly because few Meru themselves object to this.³

In publica res: the chapters in review

The first chapter addresses the wider context of fieldwork through discussing age and generation as tropes in the Kenyan political imagination. Through investigating the uses of political motifs related to age and generational categories during high-profile political contests in 2001-2003, the chapter argues that rhetoric about 'youth' and 'elders' has far reaching implications in East Africa. As ethnographic illustrations of

³ For a discussion about the ethnographic distortions introduced by reliance on this form of calendar and historical reckoning, see Renato Rosaldo's (1980: 48) *Ilongot Headhunting: A Study of Society and History, 1883-1974*.

how age and generation are implicated in local and national thinking about politics, I draw upon discussions about the Mungiki sect, a Gikuyu 'youth' social movement, as well as how the General Election campaigns in Meru North were framed within the vocabulary and rhetoric of local debates about generational succession. To accurately portray the interpretive scheme used in this thesis, these examples are followed by a lengthy discussion about the state-of-the-art in theory on age and generational 'systems', long held to be a regional speciality of ethnographers working in East African societies. This discussion helps position this thesis within concern for the historical dimensions of such forms of social organisation and representation.

A second, more ethnographic chapter examines current and past debates within Meru about 'tradition' and 'modernity', shorthand codes for generalised anxieties and expectations surrounding the interplay of planned change and contingent transitions. At the heart of these debates lies the Meru age-class and generational 'system', itself thought of as undergoing constant renovation from generation to generation. A main concern of this chapter is the problem of historical perspective in writing ethnography. This is especially acute when writing about forms of social life which are implicated in managing and making sense of the changes in the life course. When it comes to historicising selves and subjectivities, the chapter argues, the actual historicity of the fieldwork encounter must be taken into consideration. One must understand that the position of 'informants' shift over time and, hence, historical reconstructions of any 'system' based on an ethnographic present require further reconstructions of the *once was* within the situatedness of the *now*. To contextualise this theoretical point, debates encountered during fieldwork over the authenticity of boys' circumcisions are presented as an ethnographic example of this methodological problem of historical perspective. The chapter also includes an extended sociological

description of age-class formation among the Imenti and Tigania as a guide to further chapters in the thesis.

Chapter three discusses the ambiguities introduced when anachronistic terms enter into the debates mentioned in the previous chapter. By focusing on a problematic concept, that of *gĩtĩba*, this chapter aims to underscore that ‘everyone’s past is different’, a reference to the historicity implicit in the construction of generational or cohort-based identities, subjectivities, and ‘consciousness.’ This view is introduced to further contextualise the problem of historical perspective. Through an exploration of key words used at different times in different ways, the chapter then discusses the rhetorics employed in historical knowledge.

An extensive ethnographic exploration of the enigmatic character of generational succession and the rites associated with it is presented in chapter four. By initially arguing that one of the first questions ethnographers have asked about age and generational ‘systems’ is the ubiquitous ‘who is in power?’, this chapter aims to demonstrate that this question is not only a problem for anthropologists, but also for those positioned within and without age-class and generational ‘systems’ themselves. By describing on-going debates and arguments about generational succession among the Tigania and Imenti Meru, this chapter shows how historical memories of past rivalries between adjacent and competing age-classes are invoked to make sense of contemporary standoffs or impasses in the succession of power between the generations. This is followed by a longer discussion about the renovation of key ‘traditional’ councils through thoroughly ‘modern’ networks and their implications with the general context of the Meru as a community of argument. This is towards an ethnographic argument that many elements of Meru ‘tradition’ have been the outcome of historical entanglements with the political culture of colonialism and Indirect Rule,

hence, arguing that what earns the label of 'tradition' is perhaps best thought of as the manifestation of a vernacular modernity. The focal example of this process is the *njuri nceke*, a council of elder men who make executive decisions about community-wide debate and arbitrate on the meanings of 'tradition' and the definitions of 'customary' practices.

The fifth chapter examines the sociological implications of labour migration since the 1940s in modifying the formation of age-classes and the categories of personhood which such movement engenders. A central component of the chapter relates to the creation of new, interstitial categories of personhood which fall outside the formally constituted age-classes, but which were nonetheless incorporated into the sociological 'system' being discussed. The chapter then presents the case study of a remote Nyambene community which has been defined by generations of labour migrants.

Following from the theme of social change in chapter five, the next discussion focuses on the place of schooling and formal education in introducing novel changes to the formation of age-classes. One focus of this chapter is how the introduction of ritual calendars based on school holidays effectively eliminated the problem of 'over-' and 'under-' aging by emphasising age criteria for initiation over that based on generation. As a counterpoint to the discussion of changing boys' initiations, the chapter then introduces how community-wide bans on girls' clitoridectomies have been negotiated. Using a language of universal human rights, NGOs have made the argument for girls' initiations being carried out through non-excising rites, a kind of revival of female initiatory lore, although highly modified from past practices.

The last two chapters, seven and eight, deal with the contemporary debates over morality and the implications for historical memory upon future constructions of

community. Focusing on the shifting contexts of initiation and the construction of moral personhood, many of the examples explored in these chapters pertain to youth subjectivities since the 1970s. Exploring the idiom of the ‘mannerless generation’, *nthukî ncabûka*, through the production of regional music, especially gospel music which draws upon allegories about the end of community drawn from the nineteenth century traditions of prophesy, this chapter argues that understanding the contingencies of present youths’ lives requires an analysis of how traditional categories of thought and practice come to be reconfigured through critical events. These critical events, including major initiatory rites, provide the forum and the rhetoric through which to argue and debate Meru ‘culture’ and ‘society.’ The conclusion reflects on notions of culture as an ‘arena of interpretation’ (cf. Rapport 2003) and society as the formation of a ‘community of argument’ (cf. Waller 2000). Because both ‘culture’ and ‘society’ are notions often contested in the social context where they are voiced, this thesis questions their analytic validity outside of the historical specificity to which they speak of.

CHAPTER ONE

Age and generation in the Kenyan political imagination

Age and generation in the Kenyan political imagination

During fieldwork in Kenya, a central methodological problem I faced was how to sift through the fragmentary and often contradictory historical sources to reach a representation of Meru 'history' without effacing competing versions 'from below.' Common to all colonised peoples, many critical details of Meru pasts are silenced by colonial-era documents and literary sources. Yet, oral sources from local peoples are just as frequently characterised by lacunae, forgetting, and revision as the 'official' and written historical record. For example, living generations of Meru themselves distinguish 'good' and 'bad' histories, sometimes voicing the former and silencing the latter. Given that historians must view silences and ellipses as critical to the political dimensions of local history, how can a fieldworker overcome this challenge to the historical method? In the field, I dealt with this challenge by listening to the public debates that took place between people of different ages, generations, and genders on the contested meanings of history.

This is not a straight forward procedure, however. One must, firstly, learn the language of such debate and, in Meru at least, this meant that I had to become intimately familiar with the terminology of age-class formation. Questions about who got left out of these forms of social organisation were as critical as knowing and identifying those who were included. The array of narratives which tie the pasts of elders to the present, and futures, of all subsequent generations borrow extensively from a language that is derived from models and ideals about how to organise

themselves socially. Meru history is often voiced in a language where age and generation are more than tokens to their political imagination, they are its parts of speech. Like hundreds of other East African social formations, the Meru are highly conscious about the telling of their histories and the place of generation in narrating them, for their histories are made sociologically through what the ethnographic literature has defined as age and generational 'systems.'

Before going on to describe the relation between how one is positioned socially and how they narrate their history - in effect my contribution to theory on age and generation 'systems' - I will pause briefly to tell an anecdote and then present an *account*. This relates specifically to an encounter I had in April 2002 with the eldest living couple in a small valley community called Gîithû, 'Little Forest', nestled into the eastern Tigania flanks of the Nyambene Range. Our meeting had been arranged through a local university graduate, Kaunga, who was assisting me to get around, meet people, and interview them in Kîmerû.

M'Limbua and his wife Ciomûciaria were perhaps unique because their house was constructed in the architectural style of the 'ancients' (*antûbantene*). It was a 'traditional' cluster of huts built in wattle and daub and enclosed within a stockade for security and for corralling livestock. I picked up the Kîmerû words for specific features of domesticity and household space with an enthusiasm which Kaunga put up with patiently. Alone for several minutes in the thick of M'Limbua's entangled, impenetrable compound wall, I thought about how difficult it would be to get through the obstacle late at night as an unwelcome suitor. The internal fence, itself, was as thick as a bull. Prickly caned undergrowth, mottled by the dying sun, thwarted my mock intrusions with every turn. Although I had seen photographs of such homesteads, they are no longer built, having given way to rectangular, painted plank

houses with corrugated tin roofing. These newer tin and plank constructions are not nearly as comfortable as the wattle, daub, and thatch houses in respect to escape from the day's heat and the night's wind. Neither are they as well protected. Their outside fences are nothing more than a porous hedge of 'sodom' apples and a few parallel strands of barbed-wire. Traditional houses are, however, dark, smoky and humid in comparison with today's spacious, ventilated, and relatively well-lit buildings. Compared to my curious fascination for the old and traditional, many Meru of my age grouping view such houses as quaint and old fashioned. Originally built sometime in the late 1950s after the people of Giithû came back from 'villagization', the government policy of collectively relocating rural people during the Mau Mau Emergency, this kind of building ceased in the 1970s and many examples of its kind fell into ruin. Generally, such houses were never reconstructed after their inhabitants were deceased, but left to collapse before they were finally cleared away. This made M'Limbua's compound the last of its kind in the area where I was doing my fieldwork.

As a couple, they were also unique because they were the last of their age-class; the husband being an Ithaliî and the wife being a Ncencenga. These people began to marry by about 1930 to about 1935. I stress the qualifier 'about' because I was always matching my annual and calendrical chronology to the oral testimony of many Meru elders whose historical reckoning was articulated by 'good' and 'bad' episodes in the past, such as a successful initiation or bountiful harvest, as opposed to a famine, disease or war. Each Meru age-class is given its proper name and its membership crosses over clan affiliations in the Nyambenes. Thus, during their adult lives, M'Limbua and Ciomûcîaria would have had thousands of Ithaliî-Ncencenga counterparts throughout the Tigania and Igembe sections of the Meru. The Imenti

observed a different way of organising themselves into age cohorts, but we will turn to this later in the thesis. Although there are a number of Ncencenga who have survived their husbands (or in some cases their co-wives where the household was polygynous), the elderly Ithaliî have almost completely disappeared as an extant age-class. As very old, superannuated persons, they are recognised as *ntindiri*, ‘those who wait’, this category of personhood being the esteemed end of the life-course in Meru ontology.

Nevertheless, both of these elderly people were active into their nineties’, fetching fodder from the exterior compound fencing and cutting up banana stocks to feed their milch cow. This was a bony old animal, loosely tethered under a mango tree, but it was also the focus of our initial conversation with M’Limbua. He sang beautifully voiced, but quiet refrains from songs about herding livestock. Because I was interested in composing a social biography of each of Meru’s age-classes, the opportunity to speak with an Ithaliî-Ncencenga couple was quite a rarity and, in the excitement, I came prepared with an array of questions which, in the end, I didn’t ask. Instead I sat and listened as both husband, then wife, told Kaunga and me stories which were versions of similar stories I had heard from other Tigania elders. From them I gathered notes on a superbly detailed version of the *Mboa* narrative, which tells of the coming of the proto-Meru clans, the *Ngaa*, who fissioned at a hill called Kagairo and then peopled the Nyambene hills (cf. Fadiman 1993; Peatrik 1999). As our dialogue built up for about an hour, there was a sudden lull in the conversation, leaving me to reflect on some of my notes and allowing me time to ask Kaunga for clarifications. M’Limbua went back to chopping up pieces of banana stock with a machete to feed his cow, and Ciomûcîaria came to stand a few paces in front of me, as if scrutinising my writing.

It was then that she prompted Kaunga to ask me a question. As this was in Kîmerû and I did not have any recording equipment, I will paraphrase what she posed to Kaunga in English:

“What does the white-man think about these Mau Mau?”

“Which Mau Mau?” (*‘Mau Mau barîa barîkû?’*)

“Those ones in Nairobi and Kiambu who are cutting girls again...”

“Cutting women..?” (*Bagûtaanithua..?*)

“And taking this snuff and worshipping the Devil”

“Oh, you mean to say the Mungiki?” (*Ūî, ntikwaarîa atîrî tî Mûngiki?*)

“Yes, those Mungiki Mau Mau from Kiambu”

In a pained explanation, Kaunga conveyed to me that the old woman was asking for my opinion on the politics of the Mungiki, a youth-centered movement which appeared on the Kenyan scene in 1992. Comprised of a mostly young, Gikuyu population of Nairobi’s urban and peripheral poor, Mungiki has been described as a ‘Kikuyu-based religio-political movement’ and heir to a ‘long tradition of religio-political revivalism’ with ideological roots which date back to the anti-colonial movement of the 1940s and 1950s (Kagwanja 2003: 29-31; Maupeu 2002: 122-3). Criticised by the media for advocating ‘female circumcision’ and demonised by many for being atavistic and tribalist, they were nonetheless patronised by a number of Kenya’s political élites in 2002 whose shadowy relations with the group were believed to be dangerous.

Ciomûciaria clearly perceived news about the Mungiki as a threat. This old Meru woman was worried that the Mungiki would come to her rural location, Gîithû, in the hills and valleys of central Tigania and bring back the chaos, violence and uncertainty which had rocked central Kenya for nearly a decade from 1953-1963.⁴

⁴ My periodisation for Mau Mau may raise concern among historians more comfortable with the declaration of the Emergency which ran from 1952-1956, but I recognise the existence of a prolonged military resistance in Meru until 1963 by remnants of the Land and Freedom Army (LFA) led by General Mwariama. Units of this guerrilla organisation were still active in the Nyambene Forest until after political independence (Njagi 1993).

Although these events were nearly a half-century ago, they were fresh enough in the woman's memory that she feared the Mungiki with the same trepidation that she felt towards the Mau Mau in the early 1950s. It is almost certain that she had heard of Mungiki only through conversation or perhaps over the radio. Although during my 2001-2003 field work in Meru there were rumours of local youth involvement in the movement, usually referred to as a 'sect' by the national media, as far as I know, no Mungiki activity had actually taken place in Nyambene or in other Meru areas. It was almost exclusively a 'Gikuyu affair.' Although I do not know why Ciomûciaria asked me for my opinion on the movement (perhaps it was because I was a white and thus implicitly connected with colonialism), I tacitly accepted the basis of her fear as my research appreciated the vicissitudes of the civil war among Meru communities who had been heavily involved in it. She was still living this part of her past as a kind of experience with its own historicity.

Ciomûciaria's query about 'these Mau Mau' presents an opportunity to clarify the topic of this thesis. This can be achieved through turning this ethnographic vignette into an account, that is, an explanation of Ciomûciaria's thinking on the subject of the Mungiki. This woman's anxiety about Mungiki was not only the play of her imagination. Her analogy was based in a critical reading of the contemporary currents of political anger in Kenya. Mungiki had drawn upon the legacy of the Mau Mau to seek some kind of historical legitimacy to their political project. Analysts have come to the conclusion that there are 'striking parallels between the two movements' (Kagwanja 2003: 27). More than this, the link between Mau Mau and Mungiki is attributed to Ibrahim Ndura Waruinge, one of the founders of the movement, who publicly admitted consulting former Mau Mau generals in setting up their political manifesto to 'complete' the Mau Mau mission (*ibid.*). Just like the early Mau Mau

recruits, the Mungiki were poor, mostly Gikuyu youth, dispossessed of land and angry about their life prospects on the margins of a society which condemned them to poverty. Their vision of an 'ethnically pure' Gikuyu state, the 'Kirinyaga Kingdom', is perhaps as strikingly primordialist as their claim to 'capture state power' is modernist (*ibid.*). Like Mau Mau, they administer oaths of loyalty and collect dues, however minimal, from their members to finance political activities. Yet, the analogy between the two movements, one in the 1950s, and the other in the 1990s may hint at a deeper, but implicit feature of the Kenyan political imagination.

I argue that Mungiki's specific appropriation of Gikuyu and Mau Mau imagery is powerful because it taps into the symbolism of 'youth', 'elders', 'age', and 'generation' in Kenya's political imagination. Mungiki stole center stage in Kenya's 'culture of politics' because it was seen to grasp at a millenarian vision which was simultaneously traditional and modern. Mungiki founding members gave voice to their political project through a series of seemingly anachronistic Gikuyu concepts which were derived from the vocabulary of their age-class and generational system, long seen as defunct, possibly even since the nineteenth-century in some parts, but probably since the 1930s throughout the central Gikuyu plateaux (Kershaw 1997: 277-80). At the heart of this appropriated language was the *îtwika*, a ritualized process of generational succession, or the 'handing over' of political office from one age-class to another. Mungiki spoke of the *îtwika* not as a pacific exchange of power between the younger and older, but rather as a revolutionary upheaval. In tracing their legitimacy in long-since forgotten oral histories from the Kiambu (Kabete) area, not far from Nairobi, Mungiki founders decided to call themselves *Iregi*. By naming themselves the *Iregi*, the young men at the heart of Mungiki's organisation were forging a parallel between the mid-nineteenth century *riika ya Iregi*, literally the 'age-class of Severers',

but more colloquially the 'angry young men', who initiated themselves at Kabete to sever their ritual ties and, hence, their political insubordination to wealthier, centrist elders in Murang'a. Yet, Mungiki were also mirroring the Mau Mau's ideological use of the symbolism of the *Iregi*. In the analysis of the crises of the 1950s, some scholars have suggested that generational antagonism was a factor in Mau Mau recruitment (Githige 1978; Lonsdale 1992), with a struggle breaking out within Gikuyu society between the two generational classes, Maina and Mwangi, although this may have been a more ideological than a structural or sociological interpretation of youth involvement in Mau Mau (Kershaw 1997). As Lonsdale points out, however, the *itwika* was perhaps not something 'real' which anybody had ever witnessed, neither Mau Mau nor Mungiki, but it was an idea and 'a strikingly apt one at that' (Lonsdale 1992: 450). Besides the reactivation of the Mau Mau memory, Mungiki sought its most poignant symbolism in a language that was, ironically, considered anachronistic, but also evocative of the failed expectations about modernity which many Kenyans could readily identify with (cf. Ferguson 1999).

Mungiki have made extensive ideological use of the anthropological writings of Jomo Kenyatta (1938) and Louis Leakey (1977), as well as subaltern activists like Marcus Garvey and Martin Luther King (Kagwanja 2003). While Greet Kershaw's study of Kiambu during the Emergency itself offers an empirically detailed critique of Kenyatta's and Leakey's ideological uses of anthropology (Kershaw 1997), it is probable that Mungiki's appropriation of terms like *itwika* and *Iregi* owe much to the ethnographic imagination of these authors.⁵ It is, also, improbable that the reinvention of such terms may be traced to their use in everyday Gikuyu life. Most analysts of

⁵ The group that were known as the *Iregi* were, according to Greet Kershaw's original field work undertaken during the Mau Mau insurgency, a Kabete initiation group who were called this, sometime around 1835-1840, because as recent pioneers in the nineteenth century forest economy of Kabete they broke away from the more central Murang'a, to whom they were politico-ritual subjects and clients.

this large Kenyan population insist that age-class and generational organisation has decayed over the past three generations (cf. Davison 1996; Droz 1999). As John Lonsdale (1992: 345) remarked, the *îtwika* has ‘stirred more ethnographic anxiety, historiographical scepticism and political imagination than any other feature of Kikuyu life.’ In a recent paper on the Mungiki, Hervé Maupeu (2002) stretches the boundaries between the ethnographic and political imagination by assuming that many Gikuyu tacitly accept the terms *îtwika* and *Iregi* as promoted by the Mungiki and conserved in the written work of Kenyatta and Leakey. In contrast, most people would never have even heard of these terms without their recent revival as tropes within the political language of the Mungiki. Mungiki’s creative recycling of these terms lent them a sudden authenticity that they likely never had before. In a critical paragraph Maupeu makes the leap from a rather obscure and, probably, parochial Gikuyu oral tradition into statements about national politics, arguing that ‘in Kikuyu mythology it was the generation of the *Iregi* who put an end to the tyranny of the monarchy and instituted *îtwika*’ (Maupeu 2002: 130, *translation mine*). It is only a short step to take before this ‘charter myth’ becomes interpreted, in the context of Mungiki, as symbolic of the politically precarious climate of Kenya in 2002. Going even further, the *Iregi* become the Mungiki, the tyranny of the elders becomes KANU’s state terror, and the *îtwika* becomes the revolution of the angry young, disenfranchised Kenyan! Such escalations in the ethnographic and political imaginations demand that scholars revisit the enduring problems of age and generation in Africa rather more critically and responsibly.

Modern Kenya offers a curious insight into the continued significance of age and generation as tropes for thought and action in periods of political conflict and instability. Yet, clearly here, we are not necessarily talking about age-classes and generational ‘systems’ as specific institutional forms of social organisation. Instead,

we find it implicated discursively in contested expressions of subalternity and domination. The ideological contexts in which these borrowed terms are meaningful is particularly relevant to analyses of the political imagination in East Africa.

Even in the build-up towards Daniel arap Moi's political succession, age and generation were playing cards which politicians, local voters, and the media used to simplify the terms of their struggle. As such, during the political campaigning which preceded the 2003 general election, much ado was made of the 'Young Turks' and the 'Old Guard' in the build-up to the Moi succession. Both the then-ruling party KANU and the victorious contenders of the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) employed age and generationally based motifs which promised a break from the recycling of political élites and promised a more redistributive allocation of resources by combatting corruption, a move that was seen to be especially appealing among Kenya's remarkably young population. This discursive politiking around generation became the subject matter of a number of political cartoons, of which the following is one example.

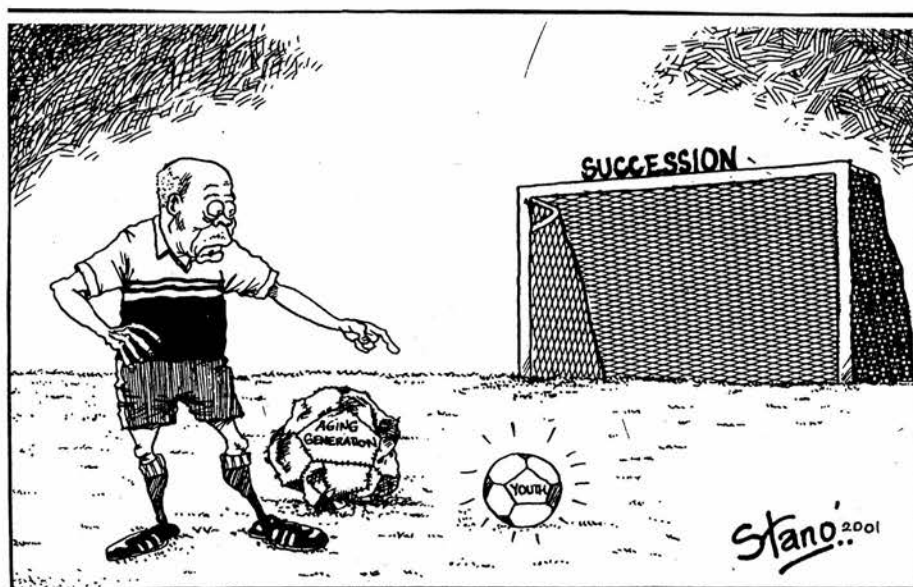


Figure 1: The Moi Succession, East African Standard, 09-11-01

During the 2002-2003 election campaigns, when I was living in the rural market town of Mikinduri, Central Tigrania, I noted how Meru age-classes, or at least their political lexicon, were extended to political arenas outside this locality. Moi had chosen the son of Jomo Kenyatta, Uhuru, to be his successor in the leadership of KANU. Not only was this choice canny because of Uhuru's age and membership in one of Kenya's dynastic families, the Kenyattas, but it clarified the lines of dissent within KANU itself as a political party. The decision to promote 'Uhuru for President' was hotly debated within Kenya around the idea that Uhuru was a young man and that many more senior KANU figures had been overlooked by *Mzee* (Moi, but a Swahili term of respect for an elder man). Those who pointed to Uhuru's youth as undesirable for such a powerful position were quickly drawn to the example of Joseph Kabila, president of the DRC, who was in his early thirties' when his father, Laurent, was assassinated.

The idea of the 'Young Turks' and the 'Old Guard' was further localised in Mikinduri, with people drawing parallels between the national political events to an anticipated, but rather slow or dormant generational succession in Tigrania: what appears in the ethnographic literature as *ntwiko*. Although this generational succession is called *kûnenkanira thiirû* (make the way) in Tigrania, expectations that it would be effected quickly were rather low. Instead, the high politics of the 2003 General Election was localised and drawn into the inter- and intra- generational drama of the Meru age-class 'system', with analogies being drawn that Moi was a Ratanya, an age-class of 'ruling' elders, and Uhuru was a Miriti, the category and age-class of Ratanya's 'sons.' It is important to note that this identification of KANU's leadership with Meru age-classes and their struggle against NARC appeared to be in parallel with attempts by the Ratanya to 'hand over' power to their sons of the

Miriti. This was a highly contentious affair, seen by some as a conspiracy to alienate an alternate class, that of the Lubeeta, who are more senior than the Miriti and, in theory, next in line for the seizure of elder status and power over the 'moral economy.' In a sense, on the local level, the macro politics of the nation were writ small in the micro politics of the Meru generational system. As such, the Ratanya and Miriti were equated with Moi and Uhuru (and hence KANU), while the Lubeeta came to be discursively positioned in the oppositional camp of NARC, not that this talk actually reflected voting practices. An even younger politician, a Gwantai, eventually won the election.

Returning to Ciomûcîaria's query, it is possible to see that her reading of the political imagination was not a spurious analogy between different 'Mau Maus.' Instead, it is important that the place of age and generation in contemporary Kenyan politics be traced, in the sense of a template, back into the recent histories of political contest and struggle. Age and generation may be raised to an ideological level in East Africa, perhaps reflecting its institutional and sociological legacy, but there is a much more general problem at stake. This can be put in two ways. The first recognises that age and generation are implicit to many arenas of social life, from kinship to political movements, and that different social formations will emphasise their importance in different registers. Secondly, and more critically for anthropological study, it is important to listen to the contested manner through which people voice the importance of age and generation in their particular circumstances. Along with these basic observations, as Gavin Smith (1997) notes, anthropologists must shift from the orthodoxy of studying the *institutions* of other peoples, 'whose distinctive feature was that they were not like 'us' towards a focus on the *expression* of peoples 'whose distinctive feature is their subalternity' (Smith 1997: 92-3).

To bring a critical focus to the history of age and generation theory and, in particular, the study of institutions described as age-class and generational 'systems', the following section looks at the state-of-play among selected ethnographers of East African peoples said to have some form of 'age organisation', while posing an acute question about these scholars' sensitivity to the vexing problem of stability and change over historical time.

Age-class and generational 'systems': state-of-play, or states of decay?

I would like to start off a theoretical discussion about East African age-class and generational 'systems' by drawing upon analogy and metaphor. In the first analogy, the reader might imagine a machine, built from the bits and pieces we anthropologists call structural functionalism. Let's call this particular mechanism a time machine which, when in the service of 'society', performs the function of socialising time and segregating the reproduction and the competing aspirations of different generations. People get fed into this machine as infants and they come out as grandparents. In the second analogy, let's imagine a subterranean river which, silently flowing underground through unseen fissures and tunnels, at disjointed intervals noisily appears at surface springs as if it had no particular source. In this metaphor, we might suggest that the long lengths of the underground river are the periods when society forgets the importance of generation, while when it comes the surface, bubbling over, the generations are invested with far reaching meanings and implications. While not pressing these metaphors too much for metonymic significance, I argue that these analogies could represent two divergent theoretical views on how to study and explain East African age-class and generational 'systems.' It is the subject of this section to

clarify what is meant by metaphors such as these.⁶

I am aware of some seventy-three ethnic groups in the ethnographic literature on East Africa which are said to have either 'age organisation', 'age systems' or 'age-class and generational systems.' In isolating Kenya alone, where the 1999 census identified forty-three ethnic groups, the majority of whom had some form of age or generationally based social organisation, the distribution of such social 'systems' throughout East Africa is evidently very widespread. Primarily because of this broad feature of the ethnographic map, East Africa has become something of a regional workshop in which anthropologists may journey to and experiment with the latest theoretical idea about what makes such 'systems' tick (Fardon 1990). Not surprisingly, since this kind of venture has been underway since the 1930s, this particular literature is probably as divergent in its claims and theories as are the peoples studied as diverse in their ways and histories. This literature has a protean quality (Waller 2000). As a result of such diversity, hardly any other speciality of ethnographic focus appears to be as arcane or, even, confusing as the literature on age-class and generational 'systems.'

Given the broad scope of such research, what can be made of its multiple theoretical orientations? No attempt will be made in this chapter to cover all the nuances of the controversies which have engaged ethnographers on these topics. The danger is either to admit the irreducible eclecticism of major approaches, or to uncover the 'elementary structures of age-class and generational systems' (cf. Peatrik 1995). Instead, having reviewed the more recent theoretical and empirical contributions to the topic, I identify three major approaches which, when taken together, hint at certain 'family resemblances' woven into the literature as a whole.

⁶ Margaret Ogola's (1994) novel, *The River and the Source*, closely parallels this analogy here while following a Kenyan family's experiences over generational time.

The theoretical state-of-play has benefited from renewed interest in age and generational 'systems', firstly in the 1970s, and, more recently, in the 1990s. Accounting for the cyclical pattern of debate among anthropologists is not only about discipline-wide shifts and debates about the meanings of our main concepts, but also about the practical issues of professional meetings, funding opportunities, and the publication of major ethnographies or edited volumes. There is also a more reflexive dimension to these cycles of debate, since anthropologists themselves speak of 'generations of fieldworkers' and authors of reputation often inspire their students to revisit old problems in a new key. Some of the major authorities on age-class and generational 'systems', such as Anne-Marie Peatrik, have closely scrutinised the findings and assumptions of their own teachers and mentors. Nonetheless, the edited volumes, in particular, evoke transformations in the state-of-play more than single monographs on group *x* or group *y*, mainly because they draw together dozens of perspectives on the problem and offer alternative ways of analysing it.

From the major volumes on East African 'age systems' published in the last three decades, it is possible to discern at least three interpretive schemes, all of which relate to each other in terms of the questions they pose, but not the solutions they propose. For brevity's sake, I identify these approaches as follows: order versus disorder (e.g. Abélès and Collard 1985; Baxter and Almagor 1978; Kurimoto and Simonse 1998); stability and change (e.g. Müller-Dempf 1991; Peatrik 1995; Stewart 1977); and time and historicity (e.g. Baxter and Almagor 1978; Rigby 1983; Waller 2000). We might summarise these approaches further by suggesting that each prioritises and concentrates analysis of 'power', 'demographics', and 'history' respectively. Although these approaches offer subtle critiques of each other, it is likely that any attempt to construct a meta-theory of age and generational 'systems' is

thwarted by the contingencies of actual, living societies. In the end, detailed ethnography continues to sit awkwardly with comparative theory.

The first recent approach I shall review deals with themes about order and disorder. Here, authors draw upon political anthropology, providing insights into internal and external societal conflicts and struggles for power within and between polities. Exploring this theme, Eisei Kurimoto and Simon Simonse's (1998) edited volume on North East African 'age systems', *Conflict, Age & Power*, sought to highlight how age and generation are central to understanding modern political transitions in relatively remote polities in southwest Sudan, southern Ethiopia and northern Kenya. In deference to a comparative approach which looked beyond the boundedness of 'ethnic' groups, these authors argued that polities that articulate power struggles through age and generational categories should be studied in terms of their relatedness within inter- and intra-group political arenas. Their typology was derived from the ethnographic record, identifying such arenas as the *monyomiji* (Simonse 1992; Kurimoto 1995), the *asapan* (Dyson-Hudson 1963; Gulliver 1958; Lamphear 1992; Peristiany 1939; Tornay 1999), or the *gada* (Baxter 1978; Legesse 1973; Schlee 1989). If the Meru were to be included in this kind of arena analysis, considerations of Gikuyu, Embu, Kamba, Mbeere 'systems' would have to be compared to those in formation among the Maasai, Okiek, and Samburu as well. The concept of the contested arena, at once a regional as well as a historical construct, allows this theoretical approach to study political process alongside cultural history.

The idea of the arena for political drama allowed researchers to ask why age 'systems' act as military and political organisations (Kurimoto and Simonse 1998: 3). This gives *Age, Power and Conflict* a functionalist bent, despite some leaning towards a historical perspective. Yet, this theoretical emphasis clashes with previously edited

volumes on age and generation which stressed the essentially ideological basis for age-grading, recruitment into age-classes and the antagonism between the generations (cf. Abéles and Collard 1985; Baxter and Almagor 1978). In brief, the arena approach put weight behind the argument that organisation into age-classes and formally constituted generations was effective in creating community structures against the disordering tendency of political contest, since conflict within specific social formations, through a form of complementary opposition between the generations, actually reinforced their military and political strengths against other groups. In a sense, this view was a challenge to the position held in Baxter and Almagor's (1978) volume, *Age, Generation and Time*, where age-classes and generations represented ideological constructs through which demographic and social changes were stabilised by cognitive and structural order (Baxter and Almagor 1978: 5).

The arena approach is relevant to the study of Meru age-class formation, because many of the significant historical challenges to this form of social organisation among the Meru came, simultaneously, from within as well as from without. A perspective which recognises a broad political arena may also deal with the effects of imperialism and subordination to the 'nation' state. It can accomodate some of the problems ethnographers face when dealing with societal shifts or transitions, which highlight disorder over order when placed in a historical context. Few examples of the arena approach are derived from polities which may claim some form of 'sovereignty' from the state. Serge Tornay's (1999) ethnography of the Nyangatom of southeastern Ethiopia is perhaps unique in this regard, since they were still beyond the administration of the Ethiopian state when Tornay originally carried out his field work in the 1970s. Nonetheless, even Tornay's later Nyangatom ethnography of the 1990s acknowledges the political intervention of the state, albeit through the agency of

Nyangatom actors themselves (Tornay 1998: 110-8). In consideration of its merits, the arena approach assists to suspend the idea of a 'tribal' unity and opens analysis up to the contingency of power struggles happening in regional, frontier, or state contexts.

If disorder and conflict is the anchor of Kurimoto and Simonse's (1998) volume, the problem of order and rules is the focus of Baxter and Almagor's (1978) earlier collection. In their comparative work on East African 'age organisations', *Age, Generation and Time*, these authors warn against the excesses of approaches committed to the discovery of hard and fast rules governing age-class formation. Rules exist, these authors argue, but the sheer unpredictability of human lives often demand that such rules (as ideals or principles) be afforded flexibility in the form of secondary alternatives. In practice, much of what pass for primary principles and secondary rules are, in some instances, overtaken by *ad hoc* guidelines of recent invention. A faint echo voicing the transitional character of age and generational systems can be heard in Baxter and Almagor's edited volume. Transitional elements within generational systems are resistant to easy explanation, despite the long asserted claim that crisis and disorder within such social systems are the motor which gives them their dynamic (Peatrik 1995b). Just as kinship does not exist in the abstract flatness of a genealogical grid (Yanagisako and Collier 1987), neither do generational systems 'make sense' as a calendrical list of successive generations. Put another way, no social 'system' may stand outside of its own historicity, as long as we understand 'historicity' to mean that social life must be approached as a moment, or a context, within a very long-term process of social formation (cf. Bayart 1993). Sociological blueprints of age-class and generational systems would, I presume, appear to be rather unreal to those persons positioned within them and acting upon them. Contingency is

as much a feature of social organisation by age and generation as the construction of cognitive and structural guidelines for action. While avoiding rule-bound analyses of age-class and generational 'systems', it may be more interesting to interpret some of the tangential social phenomena at the margins of age-class formation. Peatrik's (1995) insistence on focusing on the disordering, hard to analyse features of age-class formation over time is particularly relevant. Indeed, in this thesis, one of the main goals is to highlight the impact of forces like state-rule, migration, wage labour, commercialisation, education, and religiosity not as extraneous to the operation of the system, but as part of its modernity.

Theoretical perspectives on the problem of stability and change within age and generational 'systems' represent the current state-of-play (Müller-Dempf 1991; Peatrik 1995b; 1999). Following the earlier, more positivist work of Frank Stewart's (1977) *Fundamentals of Age Group Systems*, and its application to Paul Spencer's (1980) analyses of demography, contemporary ethnography in this vein has become more, not less, structuralist in its descriptive language. This is not to deny the broad relevance of such literature to a comparative study of age and generationally based social organisation, but such language does tend towards reifying social structure and promoting functionalist interpretations at the expense of detailing where and when things in practice do not mirror things in theory. As such, much of the literature dealing with stability and change highlights demographic analysis, a theoretical move which is matched methodologically by the introduction of computer generated simulations of long-term demographic processes (Müller-Dempf 1991). In a sense, this approach returns to classic sociological problems about the relationship between social change and population processes. The differential regulation of marriage and procreation between the generations becomes, in this approach's view, the sociological

basis for political contest and cooperation between the ages (cf. Hazel 2001). Anne-Marie Peatrik (1995) promoted the idea that age and generational politics are '*démologiques*' insofar as they are capable of regulating population processes sociologically, thereby making the demographic regime of a particular social formation the subject of political contest. In this view, age-classes are sociological 'systems' which structure power relations between the generations through constraining the key questions 'who may I marry?' and 'who may I not?' An echo of this approach is in the description of these social formations as marriage 'systems' (Mahner 1975). While this approach is attractive because of its insights into the linkages between social and demographic transition, its relation to ethnographic method is fraught with difficulties, especially those which arise from questions about data and their interpretation.

So far, our discussion of theoretical approaches to the study of age-class and generations in East Africa has dealt with 'power' and 'demographics', but not 'history.' Although elements of all three will feature in this thesis, it is the historical approach which articulates the ethnography presented here. Taking a cue from Richard Waller's (2000) argument that the literature on East African 'age organisation' lacks historical specificity and depth, a new approach to the problem may be undertaken which reveals the ways in which these forms of organisation foster ongoing debate about the meanings of history.

Two perspectives emerging from 'cultural history' are insightful here. The first concerns the view that age-class formation was an element of 'traditional' society which could not withstand the vicissitudes of capitalism and its developmental schemes. The second view, somewhat more methodological in scope, has to do with the problem of perspective and historicity. Historical considerations are vital to understanding the wider contexts of fieldwork on age and generation, as Waller readily

admits, 'Age cycles take many decades to unfold, and there must always be an underlying historical dimension to studies of how age systems 'work' (Waller 2000: 138). Because time dimensions are critical to both method and theory in the study of age-class formation and the social and political differentiation of generations, it is surprising that discussions of 'power' and 'demography' could have placed such scanty emphasis on 'history.' For the purpose of this thesis, however, it is the interpretation of age-classes and generations as historical constructions, as much as part of the expression of a political imagination as the relations within social organisation, which provides the way forward.

There have been attempts at forging historical explanations for the current organisational features of age-class and generational 'systems' (e.g. Lamphear 1989; 1992; 1994), but these tend to assume that such organisations will inevitably disappear. From very early on in the twentieth century, but especially in the 1950s when much of the pioneering field work in East Africa was being undertaken, there was a predominant assumption that 'modernisation' posed a grave threat to forms of social and political organisation premised on age and generational differentiation.

This was a view shared by many colonial administrators, such as the District Commissioner of Meru, Hugh Lambert, who in 1938, felt that the future of Indirect Rule was challenged by the disruptions he was witnessing in the form of migrant labour, religious conversion, and vocational schooling. With feigned nostalgia, he asserted, 'It is no answer to the problem to say that uneven development is inevitable and that age-grades and tribal control and discipline will disappear in time' (DC MRU 1/2: 1938). The 'de-tribalised' African was a threat to the political imagination of British colonialism in the 1930s and there is historical evidence that during this period, in Meru, those individuals who were incapable of inclusion, or were unwilling to be

included, into locally formed age-classes were increasing in number. For the first time, indigenous social organisations, such as age-classes, earned a reputation for being if not anti-modern, then backward looking.

Historians working in later decades, such as the 1960s, frequently asserted slightly different shades of the argument that the dissolution of 'age-organisation' was teleologically inevitable. Reconstructing defunct generational systems and, by extension, questioning the long term stability of these forms of social organisation remains a problematic area of inquiry. One of the most contentious historical reconstructions made its focus the defunct system of the Iteso (Nagashima 1992). Nobuhiro Nagashima, a historian of western Kenyan and eastern Ugandan societies, noted that during the 1960s, when he was carrying out his field research, there had been a highly idiosyncratic attempt of a single individual, a self-proclaimed neo-traditionalist, to revive the local Iteso 'system.' Nagashima took the view that 'modernisation' is incompatible with age and generationally based 'systems', arguing that they were abandoned by the generation following imperial conquest and the building of the railway. However, as Richard Waller (2000) insightfully observes, Nagashima does not analyse the abandonment of the Iteso 'system' within a regional context, where the Iteso were realigning themselves away from the Karimojong to their north, in a bid to exploit the opening up of new markets and economic orientations along the railway to the south. Likewise, in his fieldwork among the Mbeere, also in the 1960s, Jack Glazier was compelled to state: 'Age-sets have not been formed since the early 1950's and generation-sets since the 1930's; an entire generation of Mbeere people thus has not participated in the age organization and, with their seniors, regard it as one more aspect of the tribal past' (Glazier 1976: 313). Barely a hundred kilometres away from where my own fieldwork was carried out - and thirty years

earlier - Glazier was forced to concede that the 'age-organisation' of the Mbeere 'no longer mobilises people for significant action' (*ibid*). How is it, then, that much of the ethnography in this thesis deals specifically with the 'significant action' of Meru actors, both young and old, in debating age and generation at the crossroads of social organisation and political imagination? Neither Nagashima nor Glazier stress that such systems may be revived, adopted or abandoned within relatively short periods of time, nor do they make the important argument that 'age-systems operate both in the short and the very long term' (Waller 2000: 138). Going a little further, no approach has provided evidence that such 'systems' may even appear to disappear, before re-inventing themselves in a new mould. Nagashima's and Glazier's comments on the question raise even more interesting historical questions. For examples, what does the abandonment of such social systems in some communities suggest about their maintenance in others? Or, perhaps more relevant to the problems of fieldwork, how does the ethnographer's own historicity and perspective influence how they interpret the viability of an age-class 'system'? How do anthropologists reconcile the ethnographic present with the problem of generational time?

These latter questions may be stated more methodologically. Historians of the kind of social formations we have been discussing, Waller points out, often assume a chronological regularity in the recruitment and succession of different age-classes under differing historical circumstances (Waller 2000: 138). An example would be Godfrey Muriuki's (1974) *A History of the Kikuyu, 1500-1900*, whose entire chronology is methodologically balanced between the oral histories of age-classes, on the one hand, and clan fission and migration, on the other:

In discussing their past, the Kikuyu very often indicate the time factor by phrases as, 'at the time of Iregi', 'when the Manguca were warriors', or 'the Mungai did it.' This is an indication that not only are

they very historically minded but also that their *mariika*, or age sets, act as milestones of chronology (Muriuki 1974: 15)

The confidence with which Muriuki employs age-class succession as chronology says little, if anything, about the contingency, disjuncture, debate, and uncertainty which meet with attempts to form age-classes. Similarly naïve chronologies involving age-class formation have appeared in a number of early East African historiographies, such as Fosbrooke's (1956) construction of Maasai 'tribal chronology' based on 'age-setting' (cf. Rigby 1983). The assumption of regular, calendrical patterns in the historical succession of age-classes and generations harkens back to the metaphor of the structural-functionalist 'time machine', alluded to above. Against such historiography, alternative and often contradictory evidence for internal conflict, changes, and debate is frequently overlooked, despite the significance of such 'history' in understanding these particular social formations (Waller 2000: 138). This emphatic use of specific age-classes in historiography echoes that in the political arena where generation is frequently appropriated as an easily digested or distilled gloss upon nation-wide or localised political contests.

The methodological problem of *when* and *how* and *by whom* an age-class 'system' is being interpreted has not, so far, been given the priority it deserves. The reconciliation of the ethnographic present with generational time is a problem with deep methodological roots. An anthropologist, or an historian, has but only a few scant years in which to observe the unfolding of social processes which are, almost by definition, historically mediated. One of the first ethnographers to recognise this methodological problem was Paul Spencer, who claimed that the memory of past Chamus age-classes was to be interpreted as an account between 'true history and an expression of the way in which they structured their traditions at the time of my

fieldwork in 1977' (Spencer 1997: 134). This is often an insight which stems from longitudinal fieldwork. Serge Tornay's (1998) Nyangatom ethnography recognises this in an explicit way, when he describes a long-standing impasse in the *asapan*, or handing-over of power rituals, between the Elephants and Ostriches, the two most senior and rival generation-classes: 'When I returned to the field in November 1991 the situation had not changed and I learned something which had been carefully hidden from me' (Tornay 1998: 110). That 'something' was that the Nyangatom blockage on *asapan* Tornay had witnessed in the early 1970s was only a brief manifestation of a longer-term problem of succession. Whereas Tornay's earlier ethnographic interpretations were that such a stand-off would have been resolved, based on his reconstructions of the system's temporal models, the later fieldwork demonstrated that this was not the case. What is being described, hidden from the anthropologist for more than twenty years, is a long-standing and, probably, predictable standoff between competing age-classes, a situation that is far from unique. Far from being machine-like, reducible to computer simulations, Tornay describes the Nyangatom age 'system' in terms of local human agency, which was as significant a factor for Nyangatom social change as population growth, Christian evangelicism, and subordination to the Mengistu state. So much for any assumptions about regular, uncontested calendrical precision in the transmission of power between the generations!

But the problem of historical perspective does not only rest within the observations of the ethnographer over differing periods of research. Moreover, there is an additional question about the shifting perspectives of informants themselves who, perhaps, would say one thing to the ethnographer as youngsters and quite a different thing once becoming elders. As Waller's research on Maasai history carefully shows,

‘Observation at a single point in time is thus likely to be misleading. What appears to be incipient breakdown or dysfunction in one time frame may be the prelude to transition in the longer time’ (Waller 2000: 140). Not only is there a sociological problem of succession, but there is also a succession of internal perspectives which informants, depending on their social position, may hide from the ethnographer who does not have the comparative advantage of longitudinal field research. In other words, studying age-class formation and the transmission of power between them is methodologically problematic from the perspective of the ethnographic present. In order to begin to capture the sense of contingency, uncertainty, and conflict occurring over generational time, the ethnographer is compelled to make a historical turn; a move which makes listening to and interpreting inter- and intra- generational debate even more salient. It is in this sense, then, that age-class ‘systems’ may also be viewed as ‘communities of argument’ (Waller 2000: 141).

But this problem of competing perspectives is long standing. The first study of an East African age and generational polity to confront this ethnographic problem was Jean-George Peristiany’s (1939) study of the Kipsigis. Peristiany’s ethnography is worth re-reading in light of the ethnography written in the last decade, since this early work shares many of the same pitfalls and problems as more contemporary work. In his attempt to reconstruct a social institution perceived to be waning under the influence of colonial rule, Peristiany asked his elder informants to revive a defunct ceremonial event, the *saget ap eito* (or ‘killing the bull’), and had this rite performed for his benefit:

The last generation to have gone through the *saget ap eito* were the Kablelach. This ceremony has not been performed since, as the Government officials were afraid that the presence of a great number of armed warriors might prove dangerous to the interests of the European

community. The Nandi *laibon* Parsirian arap Samoi, who belonged to the Nyonge *ipinda*, tried to revive the custom, but it all ended very unfortunately for him. An accusation was brought against him that he was trying to disturb the peace, and arap Samoi was imprisoned. My information on the cutting of the *ipinda* was collected from old men who had already gone through it. It was quite a unique chance, as there are very few of them alive now, and *the rising generation knows very little about this ceremony*. The old men called a meeting, which was attended by a hundred Kipsigisiek of different ages, and between them they gave me a very good imitation of this ceremony... With the passing of the *saget ap eito*, very serious changes were introduced into the system of the *ipinwek* (*emphasis mine*, Persistiany 1939: 37)

This ethnographic example demonstrates the problems of time and historicity which come into play when studying age-classes and their attendant ceremonies. As an example illustrating an encounter between elder Kipsigis and an ethnographer during colonialism, Perisistiany's work raises significant concerns which continue to be relevant in the present. Firstly, there is a pronounced anxiety on the part of some social actors, and the foreign ethnographer, that ceremonies leading to the formation of age and generationally based cohorts may be on their way out. Secondly, there are the evident contests of power between (colonial) state and ethnic polity (with European laws outlawing certain ceremonial elements associated with the formation of successive age-classes) and a heroic attempt among local actors to subvert or resist such proclamations. This was alluded to above as the anti-modern status of these organisations, but we do not hear from Peristiany whether the 'rising generation' thought of the *saget ap eito* ceremony as decidedly 'anti-modern' as well. Such debate remains unknown because ethnographers like Persistiany frequently spoke to older men about such affairs, openly ignoring the views of women and youth. Thirdly, there is the striking emphasis on the part of the ethnographer to seek authenticity in his subject matter. This is achieved through encouraging the continued performance of

ceremony as evidence of its persistent relevance to the social formation in question. It is not without irony that a 'defunct' ceremony can be quite readily recreated and revived given the incentive to do so!

What is revealing in this earlier study of an East African 'age organisation' is that each subsequent cohort of ethnographers who come to study such 'systems' replicate the same concerns with historical consciousness and reproduce doubts that the object of their study will remain operational in the years to come. Curiously, the literature on age and generational 'systems' seems to undergo similar crises. Yet, according to my reading of the relevant literature, no ethnographer has integrated the historical underpinnings of such 'systems' in a thick description of how age and generation find their expression in the political imagination of particular communities. There are few examples where people are described to be currently organising their internal tensions, doubts, and uncertainties through sociologically active age-class formation. Both ethnographers and their informants are subject to shifting perspectives on age-class formation and, alongside the debates within their separate 'traditions', the relevance and authenticity of studying age and generation in African contexts is subject to historically volatile waves of interest which, sometimes, may go underground or become dormant.

Recalling the initial metaphors I drew upon at the beginning of this section, of the machine and the river, ethnographic approaches to the study of age-class and generational 'systems' could benefit from analysing the 'history' within more orthodox analyses of 'power' and 'demographics.' But merely historicising the problem may not dissolve the more fundamental problem of how age-classes and generations have been the object of reductionist thinking. Anthropologists have put considerable intellectual stress on understanding age-classes and generations by narrow

sociological or demographic analyses. According to some of the authors cited above, age-class formation and the construction of generationally based identities are the living reflections of sociological structures. But the analytic recovery of tacit 'rules' and 'principles', however significant for subsequent social theory, becomes the *raison d'être* of their ethnography, severely distorting how these forms of sociality are 'structures of feelings.' We do not have any example of ethnographies written about age-class formation which place analytic priority on working out the problems associated with the shifting perspectives of historical subjectivity. In other words, there are no examples within this literature which deal with how age-class formation is experienced by particular kinds of persons at specific historical conjunctures. Writing ethnography often entails a high degree of abstraction which may efface the personal and intersubjective encounters during fieldwork (Warren 2001: 64). The challenge to expose the gulf between theory and lived experience requires some kind of detour in the ways in which scholars, Africanists in particular, have sought to represent colonial and postcolonial subjectivities.

Ethnographies on East African age-class formation, informed by a historical perspective, should attempt to take apart some of the dichotomies, such as 'tradition' and modernity, which stall critical assessment of theories which assume the disappearance of 'traditional' forms of organisation (and imagination) and their replacement by modern ones. Time is indeed 'on the move', as Achille Mbembe (2001) suggests, but contemporary social theory seems to have stalled on this question. Following critical searches for an African subjectivity, ethnography must patiently exploit any possibility for understanding the contemporaneousness of age and generation in the political imagination of East Africans. To do so, as Mbembe argues, is to grasp what it means to choose between a 'total identification with

“traditional” African life (in philosophies of authenticity)’ and the ‘merging with, and subsequent loss in, modernity (in the discourse of alienation)’ (Mbembe 2001: 12). Ironically, the first European ethnographers to write about age-class and generational ‘systems’, such as Peristiany, had the empirical basis to make this argument about ‘authenticity’ and ‘alienation’, but not the epistemology.

Beyond entelechy: historicity within the ethnographic present

Anthropology has never really responded to the ‘historical problem of generations’ debate (cf. Spitzer 1973). Opting instead to investigate the alterity of ‘age and generational’ organisation as found, particularly, in the ‘great’ ethnographic regions of Africa, ethnographers may have overlooked the considerable methodological problems facing sociological analyses of age-class and generational ‘systems.’ What makes this anthropological object intriguing, even befuddling, has been the reluctance to negotiate the basic problem that generational time presents to historical inquiry. Perhaps, as a historian researching an indigenous ‘historical problem of generation’ among the Maasai, Richard Waller (2000) is able to go beyond others working on the historicity of age-classes and generations by describing them, aptly I would argue, as ‘communities of argument.’ Waller introduces, for the first time, the methodological strain on studying these social and cultural forms of life from the ethnographic present. The problem of historical perspective suggests that anthropological studies of age and generation recognise the limitations and horizons cast by their own history of expanding and contracting theory construction. The anxiety, incidentally shared by Waller, that such modes of organisation, action, and thought are declining, disappearing, or even collapsing in East Africa suggests less about the object of the

anthropological gaze and more about the anthropological lens. Obviously, a visit to the Meru in 1940, just when my story begins, would have produced a vastly different ethnography, but it would not have resolved an ubiquitous problem: the problem of historical perspective.

As Alan Spitzer (1973) put it in his critical essay, 'The Historical Problem of Generations', the problem of historicity - of an attempt to tell stories about what 'we' or 'they' went through as a claim about authentic, long term historical experience - is that 'each generation writes its own history of generations' (Spitzer 1973: 1353). As Spitzer demonstrates for us, this is not an argument about entelechy, a blow-by-blow account of what 'really' happened, but of shifting perceptions, relationships, and modalities of action within a familiar, recursive old concept:

[P]erhaps, when contemporary generational differences force themselves on the consciousness of historians they rediscover significant age-specific relationships in the past. Given our recent past, the current preoccupation with past generations was predictable, but as is appropriate for historians we shall probably run somewhat behind events, flooding the market with histories of generations just when our present generational crisis has evaporated. There is nothing wrong with this - our responsibility does not lie in being up-to-date but in the effective application of what has been a vague, ambiguous, and stretchable concept to the explanation of past events (Spitzer 1973: 1353).

This is precisely how Meru 'apply' the concept of generation in the telling of their history. Importantly, most Meru remain quiet about the tacitly accepted problems associated with their age-class formation when they are in the mode of narrating their history. Specific 'facts' relating the historicity of a particular group of people, whether a dynastic story about a clan or a tale about the exploits of a group of initiates, are relatively less important than the identification of where the mentioned group may be located in a long-term framework for history which is both progressive and recursive in its theoretical underpinnings (cf. Peel 1987: 282). Here, the historicity of generation is a trope in the explanation of more general entanglements of 'good' and

‘bad’ events, relationships, happenings, and processes. The *nthukî*, as the age-class and the generation are called, contains such flexibility in meaning and ‘application’, not to mention organisation, that it becomes a powerful metaphor among the Meru as a community of argument.

These dynamics are most visible in the aftermath of what Veena Das (1995) calls ‘critical events’, happenings which relocate and reappraise the problems associated with categories of tradition. To follow Das a little closer, the problem for contemporary anthropological writing about ‘East African age-class and generational systems’ is not that they are dealing with something which has ‘collapsed’ - a granary collapses, a generation simply dies off - but that ‘old concepts, being asked to inhabit unfamiliar spaces, acquire a new kind of life’ (Das 1995: 1). The methods used to understand how ‘critical events’ transfigure the anthropological ‘object’, in this case age-class formation and the historicity of generation, must recognise the residual traces of ‘traditional’ modes of action, not as the ruins of modernisation, but as manifestly new modes of action and forms of life. In other words, I aim to argue that age-class formation in Meru, Kenya, continues to be of significance because it is, as Spitzer argues about ‘generations’, indeterminate and flexible. The relevance of the Kîmerû concept of *nthukî* to new and old ‘generations’ is that new modes of action and thought may be reorganised around a residual, old concept.

Social theory remains challenged in reconciling material social change with the multiple perspectives through which it is recognised and voiced. This is especially the case when ‘age organisation’ is the focus, provoking the idea that when certain ‘rules’ or ‘principles’ are abandoned the entire ‘system’ becomes defunct. There is less commitment to historicising the changes which may occur within social relations and identities spread across and between generational times. Even less attention is paid to

the successive transformation of the many 'rules' and 'principles' through which people meaningfully organise themselves. Claims such as, 'once placed within an age-class, one does not, in effect, defect from it' (Stewart 1977) may be questioned by the particulars of persons' biographies, some of whom may have never been effectively positioned in such a categorical manner, but may claim a more interstitial position vis-à-vis others. Perhaps one generation comes into being through a set of 'rules' and 'principles' which turn out, historically, to be quite unique to a specific cohort experiencing particularly formative political and economic conditions. As such, social action is often closely associated with the consciousness a particular age-class has of its position relative to other classes. Its participants become acutely aware - even reflexive, one might say - of their collective actions upon the wider social arena. Ironically, these same social actors may, or perhaps may not, be aware of the rules and principles which constrain other possible courses of action or behaviour.

Reflexivity within generations, such that they form distinct social identities, is by no means a *zeitgeist* expressing the 'spirit of the times.' Such fuzzy, romanticist notions are perhaps more effective when employed as ideology, rather than as theory for grounded ethnography. In post-colonial Kenya, for example, the term 'Uhuru Generation' (*uhuru*, Swa. for freedom, emancipation) was originally coined by journalists to celebrate those citizens who were born during the presidency of Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya's independence leader who died in 1978. Latterly, however, the term came to symbolise the crisis of collective memory assumed for youth who had no historical consciousness of having been colonised subjects and, hence, little in the way of radical, subaltern nationalism (cf. Mbembe 1985; Werbner 1998). Nobody encountered during fieldwork who fit into this age category claimed identification with the *Uhuru* Generation, although I frequently heard it being employed critically as

either a kind of cynical slur about the 'younger generation' (1964-1978); or as a term used to describe people now in mid-life who shared some of the post-independence optimism. Because the term is never used for younger persons who were born sometime around the presidency of Daniel arap Moi (1978-2003) identification with the *Uhuru* Generation is not synonymous with a *zeitgeist* of the postcolony. Any search for such a 'spirit' of Kenya's postcolonial history would have to first distinguish between overlapping and frequently contradictory expressions of postcolonial subjectivity, before concluding that no such 'spirit' exists, apart from a struggle for subjectivity.

The kind of reflexivity which gives rise to the self-identification of specific cohorts is dealt with in this thesis as the historicity of generation. When talking about the historicity of generation, there emerges the possibility to approach the study of age and generation as categories which are entangled historically in the lives of different individuals, to the point that interpretation of the meanings of these categories are in flux with the changing situations and moments that define subjectivity. Following Bayart's (1993) grasp of historicity as the idea that 'politics must always be understood as a moment in a complex and very-long term story' (Leys 1996: 40), this thesis argues that the 'discursive genre' through which Meru tell their story has been that of the different age-classes or *nthukî*. *Nthukî* - as both a flexible concept and a specific organisation of individuals into age and generationally based groups - is the operative concept to be explored in this thesis. Locally significant debate and contestations are framed and organised, at differing historical conjunctures, through the respective age-class formation of people separated by age, gender and generation. Vignettes drawn from fieldwork encounters, contested exegeses of social life, transcribed narrative and songs, documents and other publications, biography and

autobiographies all come together to argue that people are not the same. This approach grounds fuzzier concepts such as *entelechy* or *zeitgeist* in the social practice of specific individuals, and groupings of persons, when they come to speak about or enunciate that their subjectivity and identity is emmeshed within a particular time or historical crossroad. The ethnographer can only get glimpses of this relation to history. It is limited by the lives of informants. Historicity is not necessarily interpretable over periods of time stretching beyond the biographic horizons of its protagonists.

This kind of reflexivity is the site of ongoing contests and conflicts. It is specific and particular to the construction of the historical present, despite remaining with its protagonists in the acts of memory and forgetting; affirming and gainsaying; predicting and divining. Such reflection on a generation's place in the order of things does not occlude fantasies of the future. The particularity of each generation, including its own debates and lack of cohesive subjectivity, emphasises the need to reflect on the position from which a social identity or action has been fashioned. Because of the possibility of estrangement from their parental and filial counterparts, East African age-classes offer a unique and experimental study of shifting historical and social identities. Age-classes, however, do not always reflect all of the transitions occurring over generational time, nor do they embody their historicity in isolation of other socially constituted positions. An age-class comes into being through the social compulsion to slap boundaries around self-knowledge. Just as the historicity of a given individual is expressed in an intersubjective context, the *entelechy* identifying the experiences of a generation comes about through a constant negotiation of the conditions of the present. From a historical and ethnographic perspective, this is what makes the study of separate, successive age-classes so crucial to understanding transition within societies articulated upon what the literature has called a generational

‘system.’

During the Meru fieldwork, the historicity of all living generations was only available through intersubjectivity and dialogue. From encounter to encounter, the narration of historical experiences (in the context of research on age-classes) brimmed over with potential comparisons between the present and the past. For example, an aged couple recalled being instructed by the authorities to hide in the forest after word spread, in 1941, that a market town some twenty kilometres from Meru, Isiolo, had been bombed by an enemy Italian airplane. These elders described how the word spread so rapidly that there was panic. The chiefs, or *kaborio*⁷, told people to stay in hiding. Certainly news of the attack’s failure, much touted by the District Commissioner of the time, reached their remote valley neighbourhood much later than areas like Mutindwa, Maua, and Mikinduri. Remembered sixty-three years later as a terrifying event, I found myself reflecting on the impact of news upon my own historicity. Could I forget the images and mixed emotions associated with ‘9/11’? Likewise, news about the violence of urban vigilante groups, especially the Mungiki sect, brought about comparisons with the Mau Mau by many of those who had experienced the violence of the Emergency from 1952-1958. The creation of a historical analogue, like the use of allegory, is often a means through which to comment and act upon the construction of the present through the idioms of the past. The imagined stability of a generation, slow to come into social being before its gradual decline, has a kind of motility which allows for flexibility in the telling of history.

⁷ This is a Kĩmenti term meaning ‘ropes’, with which colonial chiefs tied up incarcerated suspects or offenders

CHAPTER TWO

Communities of Argument: uncertainties of Meru age-class formation

The great debate? Meru idioms of change and transition

The bulk of this thesis turns around Kîmerû concepts and practices related to age-class formation in differing historical contexts. For readers unfamiliar with the extensive ethnographic and historical literature on age and generational 'systems', the task of analysing and representing how Meru conceive of their particular 'system' is daunting. An entire thesis dedicated to this kind of description would be warranted instead of this brief chapter.

Indeed, the extensive ethnographic treatment of Meru's generational polity carried out by Anne-Marie Peatrik, based on her research in the late 1980s, is one of the most detailed studies of any East African age-class 'system' (Peatrik 1999). While Peatrik's research goes into further detail about local categories of thought and practice than any other studies of the Meru, its ambition towards representing the Meru as an ethnographic entity, a community, is simultaneously its limitation because it does not represent Meru 'culture' as an arena of interpretation. When seen as an arena where debate and differentiated points of view are as dynamic to its interpretation as the rhetoric about its coherence and continuity, expounded by its powerful, such ethnographic ambitions to represent the 'Meru' as a collectivity become impossible to substantiate (cf. Rapport 2003: 381). The problem of historical perspective which I encountered during fieldwork assumes a greater significance in this work than that of

previous ethnographers writing about the Meru. As far as Peatrik's research has stimulated my own, her work stands as a kind of sociological humus from which many of my own fieldwork questions grew. It is important, at this stage in my research, to state that where Peatrik's concern was with the sociology of how Igembe and Tigania Meru time and segregate the reproduction of successive generations, my ambition has been to represent the historicity of internal debates among the Meru about the viability of their age and generational 'system' in the vicissitudes of late colonial and postcolonial history. In this important difference lies the potential to take anthropological thinking about both age and generation a few modest steps towards a new horizon of understanding.

The aim of this chapter is to introduce Kîmerû concepts which have entered into local debates in Meru Central and Meru North about the 'breakdown of tradition' and the compelling ideological forces of 'modernisation.' This debate is probably ubiquitous within African societies and is deeply implicated in the arguments of many Africanists about Africa. These debates cannot really be understood in an abstract manner. While people hold an array of differing opinions on what constitutes the 'traditional' and the 'modern' as categories of thought and action, it is clearer to the lived expression of these debates to argue that they are actually about loss and redemption, on the one hand, and alienation and emancipation, on the other (cf. Mbembe 2001). Whether the forms of argument are storytelling, rumour, gossip, or versions of oral history, listening to such debates allow a researcher to approach contemporary subjectivities through the idioms in which they are articulated. An outcome of this chapter is to demonstrate that colonial, but especially postcolonial themes of loss and redemption or alienation and emancipation have problematised 'Western' interpretations of tradition and modernity. As far as these concepts are seen

refracted in Western social theory as theories about continuity and change, they are bound to be hotly contested by those who would wish to make these terms their own. This problem has to do with the ways in which social theory - and by extension Western epistemologies and sensibilities - has owned the terminology surrounding debates on tradition and modernity.

This debate is also at the heart of Lynn Thomas' (2003) study of historical changes in women's position in Meru society during the twentieth century. Thomas has examined the rôle of local élites, missionaries, and state administrators in struggling to redefine and change women's initiatory practices, and through doing so changed women's political position under colonialism. In the process of telling this story, she has outlined the emergence of critical arguments about gender and the morality of reproduction. Using an array of legal case studies and oral testimony for periods in the 1920s and 1930s, particularly the early attempts to outlaw infanticide and abortion, as well as the lowering of the age of female initiation, Thomas' research goes further than any other historical writing on Meru in demonstrating how local actors have reworked their subjectivities through transforming their social organisation. In her discussions of postcolonial debates about premarital pregnancies and the rash of paternity suits in the law courts, mostly occurring in the 1960s with the introduction of new Affiliation Acts, Thomas clearly contextualises the debate over the 'breakdown of tradition' within local understandings of age and generation as entwined in the 'politics of the womb.'⁸

Thomas effectively demonstrates how gender has been part of the debate about tradition and modernity in Meru because, like age or generation, it is one of the

⁸ Thomas' (2003) concept of the 'politics of the womb' brings gender analysis to a critique of Jean-François Bayart's (1993) 'politics of the belly', arguing that reproduction has historically been politicised in African societies and that Bayart's theoretical argument has insufficiently grasped the relations between men and women as an arena of reproductive politics.

primary axes through which subjectivities are differentiated in the political imagination. Key to Thomas' interpretation of changes in how Meru thought about 'proper' ways of conceiving and birthing children is the recognition that women were incorporated into the age-class and generational 'system' through their relation with men, particularly their fathers, husbands, and sons. As this 'system' was frequently subjected to interventions on behalf of the state or local élites, women's rôles as elders and midwives, 'traditionally' powerful figures in the guise of an organised women's council (known as *nkirote* or *nkatha* among the Imenti, *kaaria* among the Tigania and Igembe), were gradually eroded and the politics of reproduction subordinated to the politics of succession. The resulting argument is that women's position in Meru society was undermined by their exclusion from being participants in the formation of spousal-classes which mirrored the age-class formation of men. Both spousal-classes and age-classes have the same gloss in Kîmerû. The strength of Thomas' interpretation lies less in her empirical proof and more in her idea that subjectivity is constantly in flux and that when it comes to the analyses of social differentiation and the debate it engenders in any community or culture, as an arena of interpretation, all the interstices (age, generation, gender - perhaps - class) must be taken into consideration.

Taken together, Thomas' interpretation of historically shifting personhood is supported by Peatrick's sociological treatment of the question. By highlighting the 'politics of the womb' in colonial and postcolonial states' natalist policies, Thomas has shown how Meru subjectivities have been historically transient, shifting, and uncertain in the context of Kenya's tumultuous political-economy. As the debates over 'custom' and the meanings of tradition have found voice in growing ambivalences about modernisation and development, this thesis recognises that the formation of age-classes has played a critical part in recreating the Meru as a community of argument

through the contested ideas of tradition and modernity.

***Nthukî*: historicising selves and subjectivities**

Central to this debate are local questions about social identity and civic virtue as articulated by people's differential placement within age-classes, which are called *nthukî* in Kîmerû. Age-classes, or *nthukî*, are at the centre stage of local drama around the question of the 'breakdown of tradition' and modernisation theory, although I tend to think a more recent interpretation of this debate among the Meru has been to argue about the 'failure of modernity.' *Nthukî* are as much vocabulary and trope in everyday conversation as they are relations and organisations among concrete groups of people differentiated by age, generation, and gender. The question whether *nthukî* - the word - comes to mean 'age-class', 'generation', or 'spousal class' depends upon the context in which it is evoked. As will be argued in greater detail below, the organisation of *nthukî* - the groups - affect such diverse facets of social life such as initiation, reproductive entitlement, marriage, ritual knowledge, and political association. This thesis goes a little further in arguing that *nthukî*, as a trope in the public imagination of the Meru, have also been elemental in expressing people's experiences of migration, education and Christianity over the past sixty or seventy years. In this thesis, speaking of age-classes (*nthukî*) as word and concept should be distinguished from situations where the term means a specific group of persons. My impression is that Meru themselves make such a distinction.

As such, the vocabulary of *nthukî* express a swathe of issues related to the 'breakdown of tradition' and 'failure of modernity' debate; but at periods of intensification in the organisation of ritual activities, such as initiation, or as we will

see in a later chapter, generational succession, the concept of *nthukî* may be understood as a concrete reference to people brought together by their similar age, generation, or gender. It is the flexibility and centrality of *nthukî*, as both sociological and ideological referents, which has put age-classes beyond sociology and into the realm of symbol, metaphor, and trope.

Among the different Kîmerû-speaking communities where I carried out my research, Imenti and Tigania (and to a more limited degree Igembe), one sure method of engaging with informants and their ideas about the world was to begin talking about *nthukî*. In doing so, a complex story about origins, loss, and redemption could be traced. As such, debate about the making of a community through the historical formation of age-classes may be a portal onto Meru political thought, articulated by vernacular theories of history and society. Yet, importantly, following Caroline Hamilton's (1998) notion of historical entanglements, what this debate most strongly demonstrates is that the vernacular must be understood politically as a process, or becoming, in which crude assertions of 'African' or 'European' concepts remain duds, mere abstractions upon the specific historicity of Meru as a community of argument. Another way of putting this critical idea is that while age-classes were not a colonial 'invention', neither are they the residual evidence of a timeless indigenous past. *Nthukî* are formed in time and woven into the telling of Meru history, not as a seamless narrative of all time, but of specific times and critical events.

Understanding this kind of historical difference requires some methodological reflection. Luise White (2000) is one of the few historians who has actively admitted that there is a problem associated with historicising African selves in attempts to uncover, hint at, or discuss the problem of the African subject. In her reading of East and Central African vampire stories, as a study of rumour and gossip as sources for

colonial history, White confronts the problem that Africanists often speak of 'historical subjectivities' without any prior reflection on how past and present subjectivities may significantly differ :

When people talk about what they did in the past, are they talking about their present-day personas or about ones from an earlier era? How can we know what someone was like - what they felt and thought - in their twenties without rewriting their lives for them? In some parts of Africa, we have enough information to hint at some changing notion of self, but for most places, we relied on vast oversimplification of personalities in order to use oral sources. What someone says in 1990 about himself or herself in 1935 is taken to be true because the same person is doing the talking. Historians rarely ask if the experience is described with the insights of 1990 or 1935, however. Similarly, what we know about African selves in the 1980s and 1990s is applied to recorded testimonies from 1913 or 1947 (White 2000: 67).

White urges historians (and ethnographers) to think about the problems associated with historicising selves from different periods of time and from differing perspectives. This is a point echoed by Richard Waller - cited earlier - that youth, women, and elders will always speak of themselves differentially, at different historical periods, according to their position in the social scheme of things. For this discussion, the important point is that historicity - the shaping of self and subjectivity at specific times and critical events - is built up and imagined over a lifetime. As this is challenging enough when dealing with individuals, how can the problem be resolved when coping with groups such as age-class and generation?

Meru age-classes enter into arguments and debates about the meanings of tradition and modernity because they give local actors the rhetorical tools necessary to historicise their selves. Both the vocabulary of *nthukî* as a kind of Foucauldian 'technology of speaking', and the way in which age-classes specify sociological and existential differentiation amongst people of separate ages, allow Meru to express their historical positionality within the ongoing, recursive story of change/modernisation and continuity/tradition. In other words, by belonging to an age-class either by

initiation, or marriage as in the case of married women, an individual acquires the power to make themselves as subjects within a history that is longer term than the specific times and critical events they have encountered in their lifetimes. Another factor which differentiates *nthukî* into separate sociological entities is the contingency of historical processes and events. One grouping may experience famine during their initiations, thus postponing the complete formation of the group, while other successive groupings do not experience this difficulty, but are confronted by an increased threat of a different nature at a later point in their formation, such as a series of virulent diseases which affect their children's health. But when these groups come to speak, to insiders and outsiders, about their different historical experiences, they employ similar rhetorical schemes in the use of the *nthukî* as idioms of authenticity, of having-been-there.

Based on my fieldwork experience, I will argue that debates about the breakdown of tradition and the failures of modernity are critical in Meru constructions and reconstructions of their community. I have not written about the long history of sociological transition among Kîmerû-speaking communities here, because the intention is to put the ethnographic present into a historical perspective of fairly recent origin. I assume Luise White's observation that the past is inflected in stories told about the present and that the present is always 'present' in stories about the past. There is a problem of interpretation within all attempts to historicise selves or subjectivities, limited by a variety of factors, including short periods of fieldwork experience.

I am convinced that there is a need for historically sensitive studies of postcolonial Kenya, as part of a rupture from the scholarly attentions that the colonial period has warranted. Although I will occasionally trace the foundations of these key

debates about tradition and modernity to the entanglements of indigenous and colonial ideas, my primary concern throughout fieldwork and analysis has been to examine the differences in the historicity of living generations. This positions this thesis within certain historical horizons which, I argue, are derived from the fact that very few of my informants experienced early colonialism and most were born after the 1940s. The 1940s are highlighted as a kind of historical watershed because most elder informants reminded me that this period 'stood apart' from earlier periods. One of the consequences of the decades following the 1940s is the elaboration of the 'breakdown of tradition' and 'modernisation' debate which has dominated many strands of local political thought in the postcolonial period. Indeed, shortly after this story begins in the 1940s, the elders of central Kenya, if not all aged Kenyans, perhaps witnessed the single most 'critical event' in the history of the country in the form of Mau Mau and the declaration of the State of Emergency from 1952 to 1956. Mau Mau continues to attract a flow of new research and debates among Africanist historiographers despite the fact that this conflict occurred half a century ago. I argue that Kenyan historiography must take into account postcolonial subjectivities. Following this commitment, my arguments also spill over into vernacular constructions of the future, prophesy, morality, and the meanings of history without trying to exoticise the research matter. In this guise, the thesis attempts to translate thought about continuity and change which is often not in agreement with the dominant - shall I say 'Eurocentric'? - ideas about what constitutes tradition and modernity.

In paying close attention to the ways in which age-class formation intersects with these entangled concepts, a broad representation of the historicity of generation and the problems with historical perspective illuminates the difficulties with hegemonic concepts of social change and historical process. Yet, the age-classes which

I seek to describe and represent have a sociological presence in the lives of Meru, a recognition that I do not ignore, but suspend as a kind of ‘folk model’ which has the potential to reveal more than the historically shifting field of social relations. The age-classes, or *nthukî* as they will continue to be called in this thesis, continually change their organisation and structure alongside the transformations of what they mean to the persons positioned within (and without) them, an observation that has been downplayed in the more significant literature on the question of age and generational ‘organisation’ or ‘systems.’ In more blunt terms, the *nthukî* are apt motifs about the social consequences of change, even potent metaphors through which this debate about community can be expressed and understood within a particularly rich local idiom. As a common trope organising debate in this community of argument, *nthukî* represents actions, thoughts, situations, and moments for which the tradition/modernity dichotomy is inappropriate. That dichotomy is derived from the experiences of being colonised and struggling against or through this experience. Hence, in appropriations of the notion of ‘tradition’, the Meru meaning steers towards authenticity, and in accepting modernisation theory, Meru may justifiably be evoking a project of redemption.

In the following sections of this chapter, I illustrate some ethnographic cases involving age-classes in the debates over the ‘breakdown of tradition’ and ‘modernisation’ through the different perspectives of parents and children over the socially necessary rite of initiation. The transformation of child into adult through circumcision or clitoridectomy is wide spread in Africa and elsewhere, but here my concern is about initiation as a precursor to the wider social formation of separate age-classes. Because the terminology of Meru age-class formation is extensive, I do not aim for a comprehensive treatment of the subject in this chapter. It is preferable to

introduce some of the more general concepts and practices involved in forming distinct age-classes, while also demonstrating the historicity of specific groupings through exploring the significance of their names in tracing the critical events which occurred sometime in their formation. These names permit a partial understanding of the significant debates which have contributed in making the Meru a community of argument.

'Batîgania': circumcision and the ceremonial context of debate

In both Imenti and Tigania communities, the periods of the year set aside for organising the circumcision of boys (and to a more politicised, but hidden extent, those of girls) witness no blind reproduction of the social order, but perhaps its opposite: a public debate about the disorder in which social actors perceive themselves to be engulfed. In the tensions of circumcision and, hence, age-class formation, parents, sponsors, and initiates may find the means to actually break with the ideals, principles, and rules which are abstracted from the idea of a polity organised around age, generation, and gender. Negotiations over the meanings of age-class formation, at any given time, imply a sustained and active sense of historical reflection, and ambition, towards the goal of doing things a better way. Perhaps sensing their own engagement in argument and debate, some of my Tigania informants cultivated a self-deprecatory humour. Playing upon the verb, *gûtîgania*, 'to disagree', the joke was that "We argue, yes, we are the *Batîgania*" ('those who disagree'), a double play on the meaning of Tigania.

A few brief ethnographic instances must suffice to illustrate how ceremonial contexts may lead to debate and rebuttal about tradition and modernity. Late into the

driest season (*thaano*) during the circumcision period of August and September 2002, parents in several central Tigania locations were busy organising their sons' 'coming-out' ceremonies (*gûtûranyumba*). The initiates had, by this time, spent approximately three weeks to a month in the seclusion of a separate dwelling and were anticipating being reabsorbed back into social life as young adults. The 'coming out' ceremony is normally the single most important event in any youth's life. This entailed the purchase or acquisition of large amounts of food stuffs and other commodities such as new clothing. Parents are not only responsible for feeding their sons or other boys they were circumcised with, such as cousins, but they are also burdened to feed an array of invited and uninvited guests. The prospect of overspending on such ceremonies, or even falling into debt, is a source of worry among the poorer of households. Such auspicious events are often the source of considerable stress.

Even the gifts of new clothing, given to the initiates to symbolise their new adult status, are subject to muted controversy. Sisters of initiates I interviewed commented on their brothers' transformed identities, expressed through expensive new clothing, with mild envy. For the most part, girls no longer endure an initiatory experience, although older women who underwent excision (*gûtaanithua*) related to me that they were given an assortment of special items for adornment, usually beads or printed cloth, which symbolised their new station in life. Although stripped of any clothing while in seclusion, the initiate and his peers are given new trousers, shoes and shirt as gifts, symbolising their return to social life and, in particular, their emergence as a young adult. The new clothes, often replacing tattered school uniforms, symbolise becoming a young adult. More general observations may be made from the donning of new clothing upon the re-insertion of initiates into social life. In past performances of circumcision rites and 'coming out' ceremonies, the changing of one's way of dressing

symbolised their newly acquired status and advancement in the life course. On that day of 'coming out', the initiate dresses like an adult, proudly displaying his new status through his clean, smart, and new clothing while - above other considerations - cultivating a serious countenance befitting the importance of the event. The envy of girls, in particular, suggested that their own passage into adult life, now completed through marriage and bearing children, is perceived in less momentous terms. Such comments added to debate about circumcision in the context of gender disparity and the relative absence of clearly demarcated life-course transitions in female lives.

To make these occasions memorable and significant to all participants, an extraordinary pulse of activities is usually required. Most of the day-time work involved in food and gift provision is undertaken by parents (*acîarî*) and other 'daylight fathers' (*beethe ba mûthenya*) or sponsors (*agwatî*, sing. *mûgwatî*). The special rôle of the 'daylight fathers' was explained to me as the "cultural fathers of the *ntaani*", meaning that these men were charged with visiting the initiates while they are in seclusion and instructing them on certain moral and practical issues involved in their transformation from child to young adult. In the space of a month, these youth are changed from an uncircumcised lad (*mwijî*) to an initiate (*ntaani*) to a 'warrior' (*mûthaka*). The sponsor, or *mûgwatî*, fulfills the rôle of a minder, making sure that the initiates have enough food to eat and carefully monitoring the healing of their wounds. Despite the considerable effort that parents, the 'daylight fathers' and the sponsors make, their work is generally overshadowed by the extravert and nocturnal activities of 'warriors' (*nthaka*). The *nthaka* (sing. *mûthaka*) are those circumcised, unmarried youth who involve themselves intently and intimately with the activities of the circumcision seasons. Slightly older, the sponsors are charged with keeping the secluded initiates safe from rough treatment by a steady flow of visiting 'warriors', as

well as being responsible for cleaning the initiate's wounds and instructing them in the ethics of initiatory lore, which is generally social and sexual in content. In the dark of night, for weeks on end, *nthaka* were to be heard singing and dancing along the footpaths *en route* to the 'closed' houses of the newly initiated where, purportedly, they would engage in their 'secret' activities⁹ : visiting, feasting, and hazing.

In my discussions with a variety of older persons, concerns were voiced over the quantities of food consumed by the young men and their commitment to hazing which was, in the opinion of many of those I spoke with, an unacceptable form of bullying. Amongst the *nthaka* themselves, hazing was thinly disguised as a kind of 'education.' Several parents complained that, in comparison to past performances, the burden of material and social responsibilities for the circumcision of boys had fallen away from community and landed hard upon parents. According to this line of argument, circumcision was a collective responsibility in the past, where mothers' brothers (*mûntûetû*) and not fathers (*beethe*) were called upon to provide for the initiate's needs. This was one of the first debates I encountered about Meru 'tradition.' Arguments about circumcision tended to outline the rising costs of living, alongside a growing confusion about how to balance the conflict of 'traditional' and 'modern' moralities. For a wide spread example, should a parent insist that their sons undergo a group circumcision, despite doubts about hygiene and infectious diseases? In recent decades, parents have grown wary of the health risks associated with circumcision, especially with concern to the hygiene of implements used on their sons and the ever-present threat of hepatitis-c and HIV infections. Although group circumcision is still practiced in parts of Tigania and Igembe, it has almost completely

⁹ It is not my intention here to elaborate on activities which I observed, mostly in 1998, while acting as a *mûgwatî* (or sponsor), by default, for two badly infected *ntaanî*. I was called upon, by an overwhelmed friend, to assist to nurse them back to health. In 2001-2003, being slightly older, I was differentially positioned as a 'married man' and as an observer saw events from a different perspective.



Plate 2: Imenti boys awaiting their circumcision, 1949-1950¹⁰

¹⁰ This photograph was taken by Joy Adamson under contract for the Government of the Colony of Kenya in 1949 and 1950.

ceased among the Imenti, who advocate the operation being done in a clinic. The public health worker has largely replaced the *mûtaanî* or local circumcisor among the Imenti. Some parents have gone even further and eliminated the pain factor of circumcision by paying for local anaesthesia. The following, from an interview with an Imenti elder about why ‘traditional’ initiations and the naming of separate circumcision groups were increasingly difficult to organise, was a typical remark made by ‘modern’ parents on the initiations of their youngest sons:

“Mariîtwa ja kîrîa gîatûniîre tûbadilisha, ûtikûona, kethira nî îgiita rîa îtaana, eekûrû îbakiaga marwa na bîatho bakarigwa bîa ntuku îrîa bagataanwa... yaani...bataanwa ûû nkûrûki ya bwîjî mîrongo îtano birîa amwe na mûtaanî arî ûmwe na mûtaanî teeka arî daktari... nî mûtaanî tu binfasfi, nandî mûntû gâkomîria gûtemwa waigua mûrîmo nî shauri yako, îndî naciô nthaka cigûkarîtie ûkîîja gûkîra nûû mwanka ûrwe. Nandî tûrona ngûgi îrîa mbuthu igwiîta gûtaana aana tûtîkûbaa thîîna”

“What made us change those names was, you see, like in the circumcision period women were constantly making *marwa* (millet beer) and feasting on those days they were being cut... I mean... More than fifty lads all together and one circumcisor and that one isn’t even a doctor, he was just a self-styled circumcisor, but one had to persevere anyway. If you got sick it was your own affair, but the *nthaka* are watching you to see any fear: if so, you were to be beaten. Now we see that this work is simpler if we circumcise our children without making them suffer”

While not against the entirety of initiatory experiences, concern about feeding large numbers of *nthaka* at the expense of their sons’ physical safety bled into larger critiques about the generalised poverty of the community, the disruptive activities of ‘idle’ youth, new perceptions of risk, and the stalled nature of social development.

On one occasion during the circumcision period of August 2002, in Ankamia of central Tigania, I encountered these entangled critiques about contemporary initiation rather haphazardly. While chatting on a narrow footpath with a locational Chief, three *nthaka* ran single-file down a slope towards us at a brisk pace. The jingle-jangle of their anklet bells and their whoops and hollers made it imperative that we -

government chief and visiting anthropologist - climb into the prickly hedging to avoid their path. Armed with short swords and adorned with plastic flowers, they looked the part of 'warriors'; belied little by their grubby *nguû cía gîthaka* (bush clothing), stained calico from weeks of accumulated dust and sweat. Returning to conversation, the chief surprised me by launching into a critique of contemporary initiations, suggesting that they (the Tigania) had to "let go of this culture", which he clearly perceived as 'backwards.' In his view, the current *nthaka* were caught up in something they could not possibly understand. Their grandparents and even their fathers, he explained, had something to gain from 'tradition', while present youth had only to lose "by clinging on to the ways of the past." Contrasting these contemporary *nthaka* to their grandparent's generation, the chief maintained that while their motive was the plates of food served at each house they visited day and night, their predecessors were motivated by more martial and moral ideals. He stressed a responsible aspiration towards marriage and having children as a primary ideal of the past *nthaka*. He questioned the legitimacy of indulging young men their ceremonial life, while the rest of the community dug deep into their pockets to satisfy them. In his own location, he asserted, he pushed a policy that made circumcision a private matter between a boy and his parents, as well as insisting that the circumcision was done in a hospital or clinic. Regardless of his 'good' policy, he was having little impact on transforming circumcision towards the ideals he upheld. While conceding that poverty was the 'root cause' of all the damaging aspects of contemporary social life, he felt confident to interdict today's youth for misunderstanding all that they had been taught at schools and in the churches.

What this 'misunderstanding' entailed was not clear, but further conversations with parents of initiates hinted at a widely-spread view that the subjectivities of

ntaanî and *nthaka* had changed dramatically over the past generation. Although circumcision is taken very seriously in contemporary Meru, parents are divided over how circumcisions should be performed. I attended three circumcisions in 1998 and 2001 while staying in Imenti, and witnessed several ‘coming out’ ceremonies during my 2002-2003 fieldwork in Tigania. More and more *ntaanî* are being sent to clinics for their operations in Imenti, an innovation that was until recently reflective of economic class differences, but in Tigania this practice is seen by a large number of people as lacking authenticity.

Forced circumcisions: authenticity and discipline in question

Although there is disagreement about what constitutes a ‘traditional’ circumcision event, the idea of authenticity is so strong as to influence an individual’s status among peers, as well as define different kinds of moral personhood. Take, for example, the case of two Tigania youth who were ‘cut’ in the government hospital at Miathene, an administrative centre some ten kilometres from Mikinduri. A week into the August 2002 circumcision period, they discussed with me why they could not participate in the nightly dances and visitations, nor approach the *kîene* (circumcision field), a location where the circumcisor met with rows of boys to be initiated. One of them confided that he would be beaten or “even cut again” if he witnessed the event, adding that “those ones who are cut the Kîmerû way look down on us who went Kiswahili.” The reference to languages, the vernacular and the national language of Kenya, is frequently heard to describe the differences between boys circumcised together by a *mûtaanî* (circumcisor) and those operated on in a clinic by a nurse or doctor. The other youth described the humiliation he faced in secondary school when

his peers taunted him to show them his *ndigi*, the aesthetic practice of making an incision in the foreskin and pulling it over the glans penis, leaving the foreskin dangling when it heals. At least twice, I heard young men challenge one another by saying, “Show me your *ndigi*!”, a shorthand way of questioning one’s authenticity as having been circumcised ‘Kîmerû.’ Such taunts are direct affronts upon an individual’s masculinity.

Typically, there are a number of differences between the ‘Kiswahili’ and ‘Kîmerû’ forms of circumcision. With circumcision in a clinic, the boy is usually operated on alone. Some people argue that this solitary operation defeats the purpose of initiation, arguing “removing a piece of skin does not make one a man”, while there are others who maintain that the risks of infectious disease associated with group initiations makes this form of operation legitimate. ‘Kîmerû’ initiations, however, entail far more than the construction of group solidarity among those circumcised together and who call one another *wacîa* (brother) or, in times past, *mûramû* (bond partner). As will be described in further detail below, the ‘traditional’ circumcisions are organised according to local territorial hierarchies between the clans (*mîriiga*, sing. *mwîriiga*). The extent to which this persists in Tigania and Igembe is questionable, however, because even in the most remote areas, such as Kunatî in eastern Tigania, such involvement of the clans has been problematic, owing to a number of factors, including schooling and migration. In Imenti, informants told me that clan involvement during the circumcision periods elapsed during the 1950s, especially during the Mau Mau Emergency. It is in the perception of moral personhood, however, that the greater difference between these two forms of circumcision is expressed. Apart from elders who speak about the lack of restraint among the ‘younger generations’, those who have been initiated as a group consider those circumcised in clinics as able to

flaunt certain codes of discipline outlined during 'Kîmerû' circumcision events. The argument is that the 'Kiswahili' have not undergone certain oathing procedures and, hence, are capable of breaking the disciplinary code of a specific age-class without punishment. It is with this distinction that the 'Kiswahili' are viewed as outsiders. As an outsider myself, however, I sensed a kind of rivalry between those circumcised as 'Kîmerû' and their 'Kiswahili' counterparts, an antagonism which often went beyond mockery and deprecatory remarks. It sometimes spilled out into a specific kind of violence which is known locally as the 'forced circumcision.'¹¹

It was in 2002 when I first observed a 'forced circumcision' and attempted to detail the circumstances behind it. This term had no equivalence in Kîmerû, as far as I could tell, and was mainly attributed to the local newspapers, which focused on the illegality of forcing youths to undergo circumcision against their will. Their circumcisions were viewed by the reporters as being an infringement on their civil rights. Yet, the number and frequency of 'forced circumcisions' seemed to swell over a three week period at the end of the long dry season. These circumcisions took place much earlier than those planned by fathers, uncles, and sons for the following months. In those weeks, I learned that the *lamalla*, a small number of men charged with being responsible for the behaviour of initiates, had named individuals who had not been initiated but who were, in one way or the other, considered to be in need of discipline. Here, circumcision was made to shore up the political authority of the *lamalla*, a council comprised of men who have not achieved the status of elders, but who intend to join the elders' councils, such as *kîama*, when their own sons reach the age of initiation. Quite clearly, then, there exists a tension between the voice of reporters, who condemn such acts as violations against the person, and the agency of the *lamalla*

¹¹ It is the English language term which is used. In Kîmerû there is no specific differentiation and the English term entered usage through the media and governmental circulars.



Plates 3 & 4: Still frames from Martin and Osa Johnson's filming of the Tigania assembly of warrior *lamalla* ['ingala ilamal', 1928?]

who consider adult individuals who have not been circumcised as deviants.

One hot, bright and dusty day in July, I sat with the granddaughters and grandsons of Mikinduri's ageing *imam*, engaged in casual conversation, propped up against the wall of the small mosque. They were, incidentally, the descendants of a Pashtun trader from Afghanistan who had set up a small business in the aftermath of the 1918 famine, *kîaramûû*, which killed - by colonial estimates - some tens of thousands. This *mûindi*, as the Meru called him, eventually married a Tigania woman, starting a large family whose sons were initiated alongside their Tiganian age-mates and whose daughters, likewise, married locally. This family's prosperity declined in the past few decades when they faced increased economic competition from additional Meru and Gikuyu entrepreneurs who moved to Mikinduri as migrants in the 1970s. Although differentiated from most Meru by religion and identity, this family had extensive links within the local community, their youngest being considered "one of us." We were discussing their family histories, when a teacher from Ankamia, joined us in a glass of sweet, black tea. He announced that he had witnessed a kind of commotion at the other end of the market. He explained that a certain youth had been misbehaving so badly, stealing, smoking cannabis, drinking *chang'aa* (moonshine) and abusing his elders, that he had drawn the ire of other young men. As it transpired, these other youth discovered that this wastrel had never been circumcised at all, despite having fathered three children. Despite many changes in Meru personhood and ethics over the twentieth century, an uncircumcised father is considered a threat to the community's well being, just as in former times, an unexcised mother was a travesty according to the moral entitlements of reproduction (cf. Thomas 2003). A plan of action was quickly hatched to apprehend him and drag him to the house of a circumcisor where he would be 'cut.' But first, they declared, they needed to collect

money, the *makethi ja mûtaani* (literally, the circumcisor's harvest), to pay for the circumcisor's beer and food. Although many circumcisors are paid in kind with millet beer, mead, and meat, some insist on cash payments as well. And so, on this hot and dusty day, they were parading the youth up and down the market's shops and kiosks calling out for donations and urging on-lookers to support them. The crowd had pulled off the young man's shorts, slung a sisal bag around his neck for the donations and sang *marîrî*, a form of circumcision song. For the most part, shopkeepers and passersby gave what small change they could afford to the crowd of young men and curiosity seekers. Satisfied with their small collection, the throng then marched the young man towards the house of a known circumcisor. Although there is some moral ambivalence about the legality of 'forced circumcision', quite a number of people I spoke with afterwards defended the practice by arguing that it was one of the only means through which the community could maintain its own codes of disciplining miscreants and offenders. A common apology made for this kind of action was the complaint that the state security forces could not protect the community from antisocial behaviour such as theft, nor enforce the local provision that only circumcised individuals could father children.

The security detail in Mikinduri was, however, involved in cracking down on 'forced circumcisions' which are illegal under Kenyan law. For the initial period, when nothing went wrong, no action was taken against the *nthaka* and *lamalla* encouraging the circumcision of specified and delinquent individuals. One late July night, however, I encountered the District Officer of Mikinduri who was in a kind of panic and seemed enraged. He explained his horror upon finding a youth bleeding profusely and close to unconsciousness in his compound. The victim of a 'forced circumcision', this particular young man was hemophiliac and was slowly bleeding to death. While I

offered to transport the youth to the Miathene hospital, the DO insisted in making the necessary arrests and denied me permission to drive the boy to receive medical attention. The DO came from Nyanza and was a Luo, one of the few Kenyan ethnic blocs which do not practice circumcision. Although the victim was eventually placed in medical custody, the encounter was alarming and exposed the tensions which accompany the circumcision periods within Tigania.

In summary of this discussion, people approach the circumcision periods, usually in the dry seasons of *eekanga* (January and February) and *thaano* (August and September), with a certain degree of ambivalence. Because the boys' initiations mark auspicious events in their life-course, the actual preparations for circumcision are subject to debate about the 'proper' course of action to take. Here, morality intersects with concerns about health, social discipline, wealth, and the historically shifting constructions of personhood. It is during these periods of the year that people make a forum for argument and debate about the reproduction of the social order. Yet, the debate is as much about disorder as it is about order. It is necessary to discuss this before moving on to describe the sociological impact of circumcision upon the formation of age-classes.

In the next section, Meru concepts and practices related to the historical formation of age-classes are sketched out against the backdrop of community anxieties about their viability in the future. Because the particular names of such age-classes (*nthukî*) are critical to understanding the narration of Meru history, the following brief sociological description of the Meru age and generational 'system' is complemented by a discussion of the subjectivities of specific age-classes at particular historical junctures. As mentioned above, the following description of age-class formation among the Imenti and Tigania Meru is provisional and partial, the focus of this thesis being

narrowed to the historicity of generation.

Genealogical and social generations compared

The age-class proper is known as *nthukî* throughout the Imenti, Tigania and Igembe sections. Sometimes *riika*, or *liika*, is heard as an alternate term (pl. *mariika*, *maliika*). Some variation of the terms, *riika* or *nthukî*, are common among other Bantu-speaking populations with some form of age and generational social organisation in East Africa. I came across no evidence that *nthukî* or *riika* are other than synonymous, despite claims to the contrary by scholars of comparable Bantu-speaking societies of central Kenya (cf. Glazier 1976). Jack Glazier's research among the lowland Mbeere, close neighbours of the Kîmerû-speaking Chuka and Tharaka, suggests that the Kîmbeere term *nthuke* refers specifically to a generation class, while *riika* refers to an age-class. In the Mbeere context, *nthuke* is employed when referring to an adjacent generation, usually signifying the presence of an age-class (*riika*) formed between the position of fathers and sons. In other words, there usually is one age-class formed between that of fathers and sons. In Kîmerû, however, other terminology and concepts are used to identify generational classes and their dual organisation (see Chapter Three on the concept of *gîîba*), hinting at the exception which the Meru present for comparative sociological analysis.

During fieldwork the etymology of *nthukî* could not be discerned, although its meaning as a social generation - or age-class - contrasts with the term *rûcîara*, used for

describing a genealogical generation.¹² The Kîmerû concepts of *nthukî* (or *riika*) and *rûcîara* have significant temporal distinctions as pertains to their usage. One may speak of a historical relationship between *nthukî*, as is expressed in the expression “*nthukî-o-nthukî*” (‘from generation to generation’). Thus, *nthukî*, implies an idea about tradition and history. By extension, *nthukî* and *riika* are often applied to the transmission of practices and ideas particular to the historicity of a specific group of men and their spouses. In practice, whether one is speaking about an age-class, a social generation, or a spousal cohort, the term used is *nthukî*. To some extent, despite the above stress that the terms are equivalent, speaking of a particular *riika* usually means a group of men, exclusive of their wives. *Nthukî*, therefore, is associated with historically contingent generations; or, to be precise, those who have knowledge of one another. In their biographies, elder Meru informants would frequently situate their age with reference to “how many *nthukî*” they had seen, alongside any critical events such as famines, wars, and diseases which had occurred in their lifetimes.

In contrast, *rûcîara* refers to ‘begetting’ and may be understood to mean filiation. The word itself is derived from the root stem *-cîa-* from which the verb *gûcîara* (to beget, to give birth) is constructed. A number of further words can be constructed from this root, such as *mûcîarî* (a parent, pl. *acîarî*) and *gîcîaro* (adoption, as well as cross-clan affiliation, or ‘blood brotherhood’). The idea of a genealogical generation is closely linked to the limits of the life-course enclosed by birth and death. Consider the oft-quoted Biblical passage, “*Rûcîara rûmwe rwathîra-rî, nî rûngî rwîjaga*” (‘Each generation is finished by the coming of another’).

¹² The Bantu term *nthuke* turns up in Mbeere as an age-cohort (Glazier 1976: 114) while *irua*, *rika* and *riika* are references to age and generational classes among the Giriama and Gikuyu respectively (Brantley 1978; Kershaw 1997; Droz 1999). *Rûcîara* - genealogical generation - is a derivative of the transitive verb *gûcîara* to give birth, engender. See Jan Vansina’s (1990) *Paths in the Rainforests* for Western Bantu lexical data, where the derivation ‘to name’ is given as the root *-dok-* and the word for ‘friend’ and ‘namesake’ is given as *-doki* (Vansina 1990: 277). The comparison is suggestive of a possible etymology.

According to my understanding, Meru thinking about generations and the life-course do not include the non-living, and the spiritual or relational importance of ancestors is downplayed.¹³ There have, however, been significant transformations in this regard.

Quite a few of my elder informants, for example, argued that prior to the Christianisation of large numbers of Meru in the 1940s the Kîmerû term for a 'spirit' was *îrundu*, which means today a 'shadow', but which used to mean a 'shade', or, a spectral being linked to the material landscape and found in such natural features as rivers, trees, and pools. Jeffrey Fadiman (1993), undertaking his oral history of the Meru in the late 1960s, suggested that the Meru had a clear concept of their ancestors in the form of *nkoma* (spirits). According to my interlocutors, all of them, Christian or Muslim, the word *nkoma* came with the Swahilisation of Kîmerû and was more atoned to the Christian cosmology of an afterlife. As such, knowledge of ancestral afterlife or the presence of ancestors may be historically traced to be of relatively recent adoption. *Rûcîara* has a much more shallow temporal resonance. Here, genealogical generations are more determinate, often no more than the primary linkage of the parental and filial relation. The distinction is worth being upheld at the level of interpretation; because while *rûcîara* relates to the biological necessity of reproduction and population renewal; *nthukî* stresses the equal need for the regulation of fertility and procreation, and, reflects upon both processes of reproduction in all of their social and political ramifications.

Comparing Imenti and Tigania age-class formation

Although the Imenti and Tigania employ a similar vocabulary to describe and

¹³ I am aware of some disagreement on this issue, particularly among some Meru authors writing about their own society (cf. M'Imanyara 1992).

order the formation of their age-classes, there are significant differences in their sociology and history. At this point, it is necessary to outline these differences. In theory, among the Imenti, the successive formation of age-classes follows what may be called a 'linear' organisation. In contrast, the Tigania share with the Igembe what might be considered a 'cyclic' organisation. Recognising that this is a simplistic interpretation, based on metaphors of 'linear' and 'cyclic' organisation, it is also the way in which Meru themselves describe their age and generational 'systems' to outsiders and, often, to themselves. I will first outline the Imenti representation of their age-classes, before moving on to that of the Tigania and Igembe. Because I have described Meru age-classes as inclusive of their spouses, it is also necessary to include the names of the wives of a particular *nthukî*.

Among Imenti youth, there is difficulty in recalling their parents' and grandparents' age-classes. My interpretation of this lapse in memory about *nthukî* has to do with the problem of historical perspective. As an old woman suggested to me, "The younger people don't know about age-classes because they have not yet had their children circumcised." Here, this old woman was not arguing that young people have grown refractory about 'traditional' forms of knowledge, but was plainly suggesting that they lacked the necessary historical perspective to understand the formation of successive age-classes in generational time. In other words, the social formation of a particular age-class is only considered complete when all their children (today, meaning boys) have begun to agitate for their own initiation and have been circumcised. In terms of years, an age-class is in formation for approximately a decade, although it is only considered completed when the sons of this *nthukî* begin to demand their own circumcisions, a period of time ranging from 25 to 27 years. This longer

period corresponds to the length of a generation in Meru thinking.¹⁴ This calculation was based on the available biographical materials I was able to garner as well as tracing the historical chronology of successive age-classes back to the turn of the century.

The circumcision of the children of a particular cohort signifies transitions in the life-course not only of individuals, but all of the age grades which are contemporaneous and articulated with one another. When a specific age-class is initiated, concomitant changes in the life-course of others is effected, such that 'warriors' and young women marry and become couples; young parents become junior elders with circumcised children; and male elders participating in local councils effectively retire from their active rôle in political decision making. Older women, especially those belonging to women's councils would also allow for, and prepare themselves for, the succession of slightly younger women into this position. The grade of *nkirote* and *nkatha* in Imenti and *kaaria* among the Tigania and Igembe were the equivalents of the title of the 'Fathers of the Country', or, the *beethe-ba-nthũ*, but from Lynn Thomas' and Anne-Marie Peatrik's evidence, these organisations of women declined in the late 1930s under pressure from the colonial government and its Chiefs. While ideals about the life-course and their historical transitions are important research subjects, particularly because their interpretation is necessary for reconstructing and historicising past subjectivities, discussion is restricted here to the more sociological and 'structural' features of age-class formation.

In Kîmerû, the terms 'open' (*kûingua nthukî*) and 'close' (*kûinga nthukî*) are used to determine when an age-class began to form and when it is considered to have been completed. These metaphors of 'opening' and 'closing' appear with regularity in

¹⁴ Interpretatively, I would argue that Meru observations about the length of a generation are shorter and more strictly defined than those imagined for Europeans. It is common in European popular culture to argue that a 'century' allows for the formation of three generations, but in the Meru imaginary, the equivalent unit of time, a *gĩtiba* (see Chapter Three), allows for four generations.

the ethnographic literature on East African age-classes (cf. Spencer 1988, 1997). Once an age-class is said to have ‘closed’, there is a general anticipation about the subsequent opening of another. Closely linked to this anticipation are concerns about succession between age-classes and, by extension, social generations. In theory, the formation of a given age-class should advance all other positions through their respectively senior grading. This would also imply the necessity of some form of succession. In practice, the predictability of succession outlined by the ‘opening’ and ‘closing’ of age-classes forms a basis from which autobiographies may be linked to collective identities consisting of similarly aged people. With older people, in particular, the listing of successive age-classes is a matter of self-presentation, with elders frequently stating which *nthukî* had an impact on their lives. Among all the Meru sections, *nthukî* are given formally announced names, but they are sometimes remembered by alternative names. These alternative names, or nicknames, are sometimes only known within a particular locality.

To understand how people locate their own lives within a chronological narrative about successive age-classes, it is best to take an example from dialogues gathered in the field. The following testimony of Nkatha, an ageing Imenti woman, is typical of the biographical use of *nthukî*:

“I saw one *nthukî*, long ago in the past when I was a child called Samburu... Samburu, that is a long time ago, another one was called Kûbai and another called Mûng’atîa and Memeû, those I have seen since childhood. We grew. Now, becoming an adult, I saw Rîungu, those who bore me, then Miriti, then Kîruja, then Mbaya, Kîbaabu, now it’s Gîcunge, now that is where I have reached. As I am, I have seen twelve *nthukî* from childhood. I don’t know the name of this young *nthukî*. Women aged as a generation with a certain name for both women and men until it is over. The women have names, but I don’t know them very well, they are like those you hear of Samburu... then men were called Memeû and the women called Mûnyange, others were called Rîungu and their wives were called Tirindi, those women called Mûcece belonged to Miriti. We are called Nkoroi and our husbands are Kaburu or Kîruja. Women were named after we all had married”

As with younger people, even the aged are subjected to the problem of historical perspective, witnessed by Nkatha's admission that she does not know "the name of this young *nthukî*", because it is removed from her own experiences. She also reveals the implicit gender bias in telling history through the succession of age-classes and relating these to historical events or processes when she claims that her knowledge of women's age-classes is incomplete. Other examples of this kind of narrative, which I heard regularly as preludes to biographies, suggest that the problem of historical perspective has deep implications for the reconstruction of historical subjectivities. Gender and age, in particular, sharply differentiate the points of view from which histories are told. Furthermore, the task of placing this narrative of which "*nthukî* I have seen" into an accurate historical chronology is problematic. Often, such narrations need to be read as idiosyncratic accounts of larger historical events, happenings, or situations.

Nkatha was married to a man initiated as a Kaburu (Kîruja) and the wives were called Nkoroi ('colobus monkey'), a cohort whose funerals are becoming ever more frequent in the late 1990s and whose survivors are now becoming great-grandparents (*kîojûûjû*, pl. *bîojûûjû*). This woman's biography and age suggests, however, that the 'Samburu' she spoke of referred to people who came to Meru in the late nineteenth century as refugees from the internecine wars of the Laikipiak Maasai (cf. Fadiman 1993; KNA: PC 1/1). There may well have been Samburu women who became the wives of Imenti and Tigania men in the 1890s. In Igembe and Tigania it is commonly heard that "such and such a clan were originally from Rendille or Samburu country", a distinction of Meru clan hierarchies which led Jürg Mahner to speak of clans of

‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ in the Nyambenes (cf. Mahner 1975: 405).¹⁵ The so-called Samburu age-class which this old woman spoke of would have been elders when she was a young woman in the late 1920s. Her parent’s *nthukî* were the Rîungu and the Tirindi. The Rîungu would have been lobbying to form their age-class sometime before the turn of the century, because the Memeû or Kiramana were of ‘warrior’ age when the conquest of Meru was effected in 1908.

Interestingly, this particular old woman omitted the name of a decisive age-class in the early colonial period, the Mûrungî, who were of the ‘warrior’ grade during the outbreak of the First World War. Because her father was a younger member of this *nthukî*, she recalled the name of the age-class as Rîungu. Based on principles of seniority within the formation of age-classes, each Imenti *nthukî* was further divided into a senior and a junior grouping. In this case, the Mûrungî were the senior and the Rîungu the junior. As we will see with the Tigania and Igembe, there are further divisions within a *nthukî* based on the opening and closing of internal circumcision sets called *mataana* (sing. *îtaana*). The Tigania and Igembe had three such divisions within their age-class formation, but in Imenti there was a maximum of two, although some individuals would be added to these groups retrospectively. In Imenti, there was much less emphasis on these *mataana*, an aspect of their ‘system’ which I discuss in greater detail below. According to government ethnography conducted in the mid-1930s, such senior and junior circumcision groups among the Imenti were known as *chankanabiri* and *ntîmîrigwe* (Lambert 1956: 35), although these terms are highly anachronistic today. This distinction based on *mataana* is not recalled by age-classes younger than

¹⁵ Early on during the colonial administration of Meru, Edward Butler Horne, the first DC of Meru, noted the presence of Maa speakers in Ūringû and Kianjai, two locations within northern Tigania, as well as in Katheri in northern Imenti. Over a hundred years ago, Rendille were said to have intermarried extensively with the Igembe, among whom they had clan-based affiliations, known in Kîmerû as *gîciaro*. In 1916, Horne wrote of the ‘infusion of new blood’ in the making of the various Kîmerû-speaking polities, adding that ‘In Tigania and Igembe the straight hair and semetic features are very marked in most of the old men’ [KNA 1910-1916: PC 1/1]

the eldest remnants of the mostly-deceased Miriti and their wives, the Mûcece.¹⁶ Throughout all the Meru sections, the Miriti and their counterparts elsewhere, such as the Kiramunya of Tigania and Igembe, were conscripted into the Carrier Corps (*kariokor*) during the campaigns of the First World War in East Africa. Thousands of young men worked as porters on the Tanganyika front lines, earning them the alternative name *Kaaria* (after the English, ‘carrier’). *Kaaria* is now a popular name among the grandsons of these veterans of the First World War.

Hugh Lambert’s (1945) mention of a numerically large circumcision class called *chankanabiri* was largely contested by Imenti informants, most claiming they had never heard of such a thing.¹⁷ Even the eldest Imenti men and women I spoke with knew of no division of *nthukî* into smaller circumcision groups, although they did use the word *mataana* to describe groups of initiates circumcised together. These groupings, *mataana* (sing. *îtaana*), are the subject of the following section below, but it should be noted here that their significance to the Imenti appears negligible. In the declension of Imenti age-classes, however, some elders spoke of further categories of *nangitîa* and *kîmonyê*. These were described as *mataana*, but descriptions of how one was positioned within such groups implied a ‘lag’ rather than a statistical placement. An Imenti acquaintance of mine went on to suggest, “*nangitîa nî îtaana-rî rîrîngaga rîngî*” (‘Nangitîa were a group circumcised and attached to another later group’); while another stated, “*Tûuge nangitîa nî kînyiritha kîa nthukî ù yathira*” (‘We can say that Nangitîa are the laggards of the age-class which has passed’). For a long stretch of fieldwork this puzzled me, until Tigania acquaintances told me of exceptional categories of initiates who could be added, retrospectively as it were, to the last

¹⁶ Without exception, the surviving Mûcece are superannuated widows of the Miriti and often the younger second or third wives of this deceased cohort of men.

¹⁷ I have also heard the Ratanya *ndinguri* (*nkûrû*) of Mûciîmûkûrû, Tigania, call themselves *chenganabiri*.

circumcision set. These were known as *mwongela*, literally meaning ‘an addition.’¹⁸ This was done to avoid them being conflated with a group too out of step with the minimal structural distance from their ‘fathers’ age-class, as compared to that of their ‘grandfathers’ who represent an alternate generation (cf. Ruel 2002: 73). Likewise, the category of *kîmonye* was shrouded in ambiguity. Several informants pointed out that these young men were most likely labour migrants who had been circumcised, but who were absent for the ceremonies surrounding the formation of a proper age-class. Conscripts in the KAR regiments which fought in the Second World War were renowned as recruits from a *kîmonye* category. Again, the Tigania fieldwork assisted to draw out comparisons, as will be seen for the category of the *bûrukû* (see Chapter Five). Current field materials, however, suggest that the Imenti placed much less emphasis on circumcision groups in the overall formation of *nthukî*.

Below is a table listing the Imenti age-classes which I have compiled from a number of different sources. Oral history, biography and archival research created a great deal of ambivalence about the Imenti *nthukî* and their chronology. While I have been able to cross-reference my sources and check for contradictions, I am still unconvinced about the accuracy of my Imenti materials. There remains the possibility that the fragmentation of knowledge about their age-class formation in the past several decades has contributed to greater uncertainties among the Imenti regarding this increasingly ‘anachronistic’ aspect of social life. Important facts in the reconstruction of Imenti *nthukî* in this century were the names of the successive age-classes and the determination of the approximate period of time in which they were initiated and

¹⁸ In a fascinating discussion of how Turkana maintained a ‘slip mechanism’ to time and segregate generational classes, John Lamphear remarks that at some point in a sustained crisis of ‘overaging’, the Turkana had ‘given up and shifted their emphasis from generation to age, so that all men are initiated at the ‘proper age’ (at about twenty)’ (1989: 237). This statement has comparable, theoretical implications for the analysis of the Imenti-Meru system’s seeming irrelevance for the establishment of *mataana* despite the inclination of their system towards demographic drift.

married.¹⁹

Husbands	Years in formation	Wives
Kûbai	(i. 1875?, m. 1885?)	Samburu [?]
Memeû / Kiramana	(i. 1888?, m. 1900?)	Ncûrûbî
Mûrungî / Rîungu	(i. 1902?, m. 1912?)	Tirindi
Miriti	(i. 1913?, m. 1925?)	Mûcece
Kaburu / Kîruja	(i. 1924, m. 1939)	Nkoroï
Mbaya / Gwantai	(i. 1949, m. 1956)	Mûkami
Kîbaabu	(i. 1952, m. 1965)	Mûnyange
Gîcunge	(i. 1964, m. 1975)	Ncûrûbî
Mûng'atîa <i>jwa kilo</i>	(i. 1976, m. 1990)	[unnamed]

Figure 2: Imenti age-class formation, 1875? - 1976

Although various authors have argued that a Meru age-class is in formation for about a decade (cf. Bernardi 1959; Lambert 1956), this is a crude approximation about the length of a particular generation. The formation of age-classes depends as much upon human agency as it does upon structural constraints and principles of organisation. In the brief narrative cited far above, the elderly woman glossed over many of the contingencies which postponed or frustrated the ideal timing of ‘opening’ and ‘closing’ particular age-classes. Besides the perennial threats of droughts, wars, famines, and diseases, other historical processes of a more political and economic character like forced labour, military conscription, taxation, and schooling also had their unique impact upon the formation of age-classes and the temporal dimensions in which it occurred. Some of these problems will be discussed in further detail in later chapters,

¹⁹ This chronology for Imenti *nthukî* stems from interview materials, biography, and assorted archives and published materials [KNA: PC 1/1/9 Kenia Province, KNA: DC/MRU/1/2; KNA: DC/MRU 1/3, Lambert 1956). In comparison to the chronology established for Tigania *nthukî*, some discrepancies occur in the Imenti data, owing partially to my own methodology in 1998 and 2001.

but it needs to be stressed that age-class formation is an outcome of lobbying, agitation, and even struggle between those wishing to be initiated and those resisting the change of their age grade and status.

There are some theoretical considerations which clarify these particular problems and uncertainties of age-class formation. One of the main problems associated with age-class formation is the question of time. The use of calendars to calibrate age, generation and time is bound to be invested with problems. Baxter and Almagor (1978) noted the dilemma posed to age-class formation by the inevitable creep of demographic drift, claiming that:

The biological facts of birth and death must slide out of alignment with the social order with which they should conform. Age-systems which are based on measured units of time are unsuccessful attempts to tame time by chopping it up into manageable slices. So it should be useful, when examining a particular system, to examine this gap between cognitive order and the social reality (Baxter and Almagor 1978: 5-6)

Such an approach *ought* to be useful, but only in circumstances where the rules regulating the system are historically maintained. As this thesis aims to show, this is a stiff challenge in the face of a changing political and economic landscape. Despite Baxter and Almagor's predictions, a swathe of ethnographic literature suggests that the 'attempts to tame time' in quite a number of societies with generational 'systems' have been, more or less, frustrated by the contingencies of critical historical events and social processes (cf. Droz 1999; Hodgson 2001; Peatrik 1999; Shetler 2003: 385-412). In answer to this difficulty of ordering time, people organising themselves into age-classes have restructured, recreated, and reordered the principles and rules which underlie the succession of the 'system.' They achieve a balance with the inevitability of such difficulties, like demographic drift, because they continually resort to changing the rules. It is through the periodic *ad hoc* historical re-appraisals they are compelled to make that people with 'age organisation' are capable of maintaining successive age-

class formation.

As will become clearer throughout the thesis, many contemporary Imenti conceive of their age and generational 'system' as stalled or defunct. Their Tigania and Igembe neighbours of the Nyambene Ranges, however, treat the viability of *nthukî* as a primary means of maintaining their social identity. The Tigania have experienced problems with the timing of opening and closing specific *nthukî* since the 1940s, but much effort is put into creating provisional rules to maintain the recruitment of initiates and continue to form age-classes. In what follows, our discussion must include an examination of what limits the contemporary organisation of circumcision sets, called *mataana* (sing. *îtaana*) in Kîmerû, as well as how the ideas about how to 'properly' carry out circumcision as a necessary 'step' in the life-course (*eetalia*) have also changed since the 1940s.²⁰

Talking about cutting: explaining circumcision sets

Meru age-classes are formed over time through the opening and closing of separate circumcision sets, the *mataana*, which never overlap and are given ordinal names according to their seniority and juniority. I argued above that the *mataana* were described to me in ways that suggested they are 'statistically' placed, in the sense that some premise based on birth order is implicated in the recruitment of initiates into different circumcision sets. Each of these sets will be circumcised during differing periods, sometimes by four to five year intervals. Those initiates who are not placed within this 'statistical' order are subject to *ad hoc* arrangements which make them later

²⁰ Anne-Marie Peatrik's (1999) research argued that the concept of *eetalia*, meaning 'step in life' or even 'age grade', was of importance to the Igembe and Tigania Meru in the 1980s when she carried out her fieldwork. During my own fieldwork, however, the term seemed to have been forgotten, especially among the 'middle-aged' and young people interviewed in 2001 to 2003.

additions to the larger grouping of the *nthukî*. These were described earlier as the *mwongela*, the ‘additions’, or, among the Imenti as the *nangîîa*, the ‘laggards.’ Nevertheless, when local people speak about the *mataana*, they have in mind the three groups of youth whose initiations and circumcisions were separated in time and by approximate birth order.

For the Tigania and Igembe, for example, there are three separate opening and closing periods within the early formation of an age-class and these are known as *ndinguri*, *kobia*, and *kabeeria*. When an individual claims their identity as “Miriti *ndinguri*”, what they mean is that they were among the first, large group of Miriti to be circumcised.²¹ This grouping is large mainly because a number of individuals may have waited for their circumcision, postponed for a number of possible reasons, which inflate the size of the *ndinguri* grouping. These individuals may be described as older than the average age of other ‘timely’ initiates and, to reflect this, the ethnographic literature has called these individuals ‘over-aged.’ Likewise, if someone was to say that they were a “Lubeeta *kobia*” they mean to suggest that their circumcision occurred between the Lubeeta *ndinguri* - the first and senior grouping - and the last and smallest grouping of the Lubeeta *kabeeria*. Some clans refuse to initiate their sons into *kabeeria* groupings, based on a conviction that this last group is often prone to calamities such as famine or disease. Such distinctions are not frivolous and people take them quite seriously as they are implicated in local readings of seniority and the power which seniority signifies. Moreover, there may have been sociological disadvantages to being ‘cut’ as a *kabeeria*, such as the postponement at the age of marriage, or confusion in the choice of an appropriate spouse due to the inavailability of young women of one’s sister’s age. A woman in Kunatî, eastern Tigania, told me that her son had married a

²¹ It is likely that the term *ndinguri* came into Kîmeru through the Maa term *endungore* (cf. Spencer 1988: 66).

young woman who was subject to a marriage prohibition. Because the young man and woman's clan were *gîcîaro* clans to one another, meaning that they neither raided nor married from one another, but assisted in times of distress or political conflict, the kinsmen of the man were outraged at their matrimony. The man defended his choice of bride in front of his kinsmen by arguing that because he had been circumcised as a *kabeeria* he had experienced difficulties marrying an 'appropriate spouse' and chose to marry his categorical 'sister.' Although their marriage was a kind of incest, between 'adoptee siblings', the appropriate cleansing rites (*kûthinjanua*) were performed. Such an admission is rare, even suspect, but this man's mother was attempting to demonstrate why it was considered dangerous to initiate sons as *kabeeria*. Outside of this strict sociological understanding, however, one's relative position within the *mataana* - the *ndinguri*, *kobia*, *kabeeria* - may also express one's subjectivity, hinting that such categories are grasped existentially. A man initiated into the most senior circumcision set, the *ndinguri*, has many age-mates and perhaps feels secure in a sense of social maturity, whereas someone initiated into the more junior and uncertain set of the *kabeeria* may not experience a sense of security. One's bad luck, after all, may be attributed to one's circumcision as a *kabeeria*.

Previous efforts to explain Meru age-classes have emphasised the sociological and structural features of this 'system' (Mahner 1975; Peatrik 1995a, 1995b, 1999). In these readings, the *mataana* (circumcision sets) are seen as the articulated, constituent parts of the *nthukî* (age-classes). In following this sociological understanding, the *mataana* have been described as fractions of the larger, more inclusive organisation formally constituted as *nthukî*, with Anne-Marie Peatrik (1999) calling them '*les fractions de classes d'âges*' in her sociological terminology. In this section, however, we will be concerned with providing a description of how they

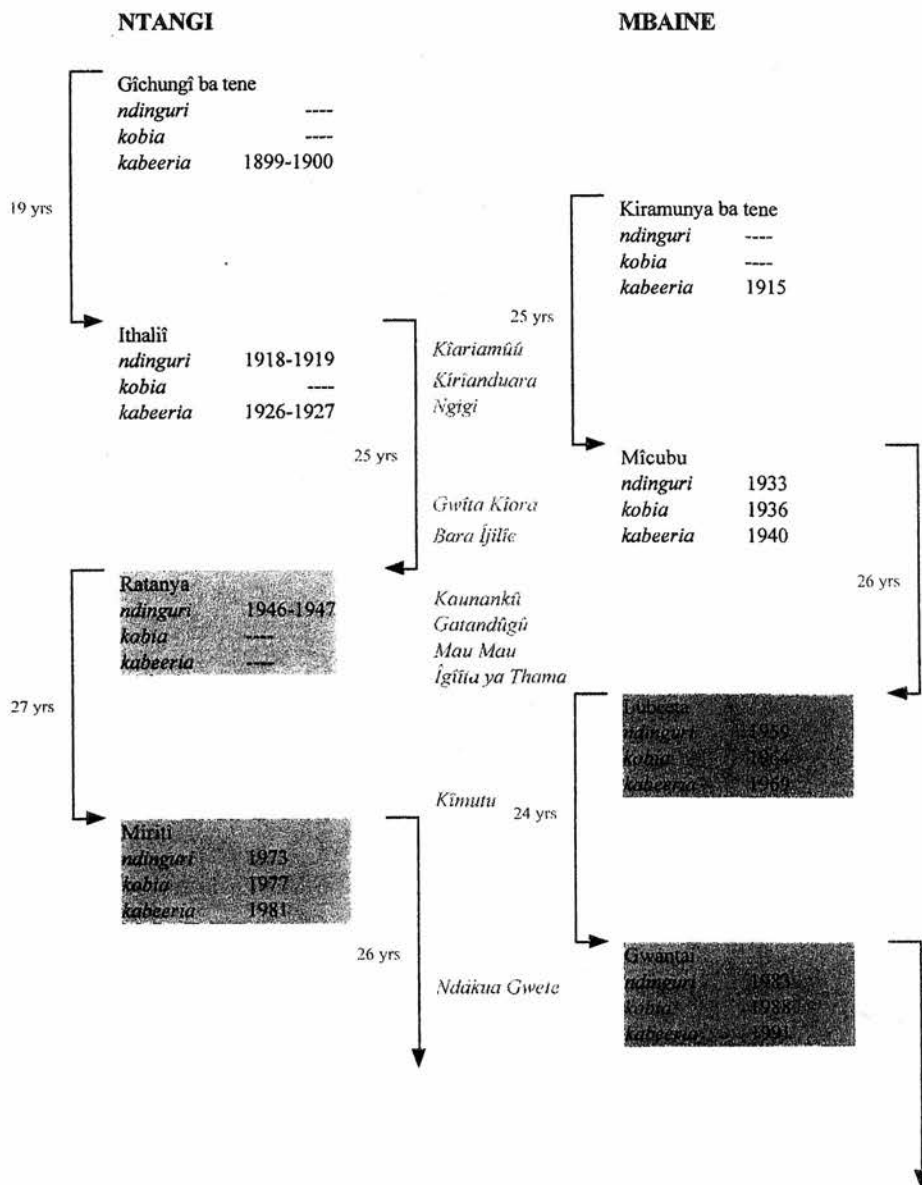


Figure 3: Tigania and Igembe age-classes in living memory²²

²² The grey-scales demonstrate the population of *nthukĩ* still living, their years of circumcision, the time of their formation, and the significant historical events which occurred within this chronology: *Kĩaramũũ* (1918 famine and influenza epidemic); *Kĩaranduara* (1921 'famine of eating leather skins'); *Ngigi* (1926 'Locust famine'); *Gwĩta Kĩora* (1933 'Compulsory Labour Ordinance'); *Bara Ijilĩ* (1939 Second World War); *Kaunankũ* (1944 'Firewood famine'); *Gatandũgũ* (1948 'Don't Have Kin' famine); *Mau Mau* (1952 Emergency); *Igiĩta ya Thama* (1954 villagization); *Kĩmutu* (1969 'Flour Famine'); *Ndakwa Gwete* (1984 'I die, You go' famine).

contribute to age-class formation in the longer term. In addition, strictly sociological understandings may obscure how local people interpret these social formations and the meanings which imbue them at different historical moments.

A clue to understanding the *mataana* as constituent and preliminary elements in the formation of age-classes lies in the etymology of the Kîmerû language itself. Indeed, the term *îtaana* derives from the root verb *gûtaana*, meaning to make an initiatory cut or excision. This is different from other verbs denoting a 'cut', such as *gûtema*, 'to gouge out, carve', as it is specific to initiatory changes to the body and its genitalia. Semantically, however, this verb's root is deployed in a creative manner to construct much of the vocabulary used to describe Meru initiations and the people involved in them. For example, the root *-taana* may also be extended to include a sense of differentiating or dividing people according to defined categories of personhood. A boy initiate is known as *ntaanî* (pl. *ntaanî*), just as the circumcisor - usually an elder man of an age-class immediately senior to the initiate's father - is called *mûtaanî* (pl. *ataanî*). The distinction between the 'cut' and the 'cutter' is perhaps important. While girl initiates were known as *nkenye*, in general the practice of clitoridectomy is understood as *gûtaanithua*, thereby setting it apart from the male initiations and their ceremonies.²³

In each neighbourhood, which is called *ntûûra* in Kîmerû, a number of circumcisors will have earned reputations for their expertise in operating on initiates and their knowledge of initiatory lore. Shrouded in some mystery, the ideal way to perform initiations becomes the subject of intense speculation and negotiation in the months leading up to the dry seasons when such ceremonies are anticipated and planned. A circumcisor I met with on several occasions in Kangeta, Igembe, was

²³ In Kîmerû verbal morphology, the male circumcision, *gûtaana*, is stative, while female clitoridectomy, *gûtaanithua*, is causative.

reluctant to speak much about his craft, but outlined the contemporary clash of opinions over how circumcisions should proceed. According to this senior man, many of the contemporary social problems among the Igembe could be attributed to the emergence of the 'Swahili' category of circumcision.

Conversations like those I held with the *mûtaanî* from Kangeta, on the dry leeward slopes of the Nyambene hills, built up my suspicion that the classic anthropological subject of 'initiations', 'circumcisions', and '*rites de passage*' had perhaps missed something crucial in their enthusiasm for ethnographic details and sociological interpretation. In my own fieldwork, the observation of actual ceremonial events paled in comparison to the opportunities I had for entering into the debate which such events inevitably provoked. There simply was more talk about cutting than there was actual cutting. In Meru, one could not shake the feeling that strict interpretations of how to organise the *mataana* had become, or always was, socially and existentially uncertain. Certainly, in recent decades, there was a popular perception that the strict, rule-bound formation of circumcision groups had waned, but I still held out questions that perhaps what had actually 'waned' were the ideals which had formerly provided a kind of model for their performance. For the sake of argument, however, talking about ideals revealed the undeniable historical fact that the organisation of *mataana* and *nthukî* had undergone deep transformations.

The circumcision period has a kind of 'charter myth' which is often told to outsiders and the uninitiated wishing to know more about how the Meru initiate their young sons. It is principally a story about hierarchy. The version which I have summarised below came from the son of a well-known circumcisor in Giithû, central Tigania.

"You know, it was during the time of Miriti *ndinguri*, or even, Lubeeta

kabeeria, when the traditional circumcisions broke down. Like me now, I am a Miriti *ndinguri*, although I was very, very small [*under-aged*], but even with us, we did not perform the circumcisions like our fathers. No... even my fathers were not really cut the Kîmerû traditional way either... those were Ratanya and they got confused. But, like our grandfathers, they did the traditional circumcisions. Even so, with us Miriti we were hundreds of youths gathered from many different clans at that circumcision field over there [pointing away in the distance]. The *mûtaanî* had so much work because there were so many young boys waiting to be circumcised, but they were not all young boys because there were even some, no many, with beards like men waiting to be cut. So, there were so many boys that one circumcisor could not cope, so the Kîmerû way is to initiate the first nine initiates from senior clans by a very special circumcisor and a very special knife. The rest of us are cut any old how. These nine boys are called the *kenda ya mûtaanî*, the circumcisor's nine, and they are from specific clans like Antûmburi and Akiuna. The boys' fathers pay the circumcisor with meat and mead, but it is the knife (*rûciû rwa mûtaanî*) which is very special. This knife begins the cutting of all the first nine initiates and it remains with them as a symbol of the new generation. It is broken after and hidden away. But, with us the Miriti, we did not really follow this way and this is why some people say we became so misguided. I remember being there on the field with hundreds of other boys, but then some boys from other clans, such as those from Ikana and Thathi, in lower areas of Kunatî, did not come as they had before and there began to be talk about how things had become ruined"

This witness to the 1973 circumcisions of the Miriti *ndinguri* reflects on the significance of clan hierarchies in ordering which initiates are circumcised before others. Although there is a clue about local constructions of hierarchy between the clans, in choosing the *kenda ya mûtaanî* before all other initiates, this hierarchy is rendered into an ideology of seniority and juniority based on birth order. At the point of circumcision, the 'insider' status of specific clans is transformed into the 'first borns' of the age-class as it is inaugurated.

To understand the formation of an *îtaana* it is necessary to discern what limits it. In principle, each *îtaana* (pl. *mataana*) is time limited. The temporal ideal suggests that each of these circumcision classes should be opened for a period lasting about a

year: followed by an intermission which may last up to four or five years. Organisationally, there are 'open' and 'closed' periods. One might hear someone describing the closure of a particular period of circumcision as "*ûtaana îrîa îrakwingîrwa*" ('that group have been closed'). As such, within any *nthukî* period - approximately fifteen years - most of this period is ceremonially inactive as regards the initiations of boys.²⁴ Consequently, some youths miss being included into an opening period of circumcisions. In such a situation, they would be compelled to wait it out, sometimes for years, until they get their opportunity to be initiated. Unlike today's examples, until about the mid-1980s, the formation of the *mataana* was a lengthy process, often spanning about eight harvests (*kiingo yanaana*). In both European and Kîmeru calendars this is calculated at four years. Since this is an ideal representation, the actual timing of *mataana* depends upon local ecological conditions. Despite the statistical possibility of temporal disorder when analysed over generational time, the reconstruction of age-class formation for the entire twentieth century demonstrates a remarkable continuity in the timing of successive *mataana*. For the intervals between *nthukî* for which a reliable, cross-referenced chronology could be established during field work, the average period of time between the closure of a senior *kabeeria* class and the opening of a junior *ndinguri* class was about four years (ranging from 3.5 to 6 years). This includes past delays for reasons of famine, disease, war, or other social crises. Particular cases of postponed initiations are revealing of the precarious basis of age-class formation in general. A drought, for instance, would threaten to lengthen the period during which boys await their initiation and probably inflate their numbers. Without the necessary food provision

²⁴ As shall be shown in Chapter Six, the temporal limits within age-class formation have undergone significant modifications in the past three decades as educational calendars have been introduced to the logic of class formation.

which accompanies all ceremonial activities, environmental constraints are a serious limit upon age-class formation. Drought and famine, in this respect, pose the most extreme limits to the temporality of the generational system and the polity which was constructed around it. Consequently, in the event of ecological crises, the advancement of all other social actors would be postponed, although in practice there were always exceptional persons willing to take the risk of stepping on with their life, out of tune and tempo with the political orthodoxies which constrained the larger population's behaviour. Such individuals were frequently dismissed as deviants.

The formation of separate *mataana* is also politically limited. Sociologically, there are relationships which have to be redefined when a broad cohort of boys and girls undergo a transformation in their life-course. They do so as a demographic cohort. Whatever begins to signify this imposed societal change, such as the biological maturation of individuals set within a cohort, a calendar is used to organise the anticipated ceremonies. As the anticipated time of a new *îtaana* approaches, usually associated with lobbying, celebrating and agitating on behalf of the younger and elder *nthaka*, discussion would turn to the public recognition of a newly identified grouping of initiates as a political body. The opening of a circumcision period was organised along inter-clan lines, giving these events a regional importance, as people from distinct territorial communities were called upon to participate.

Historicising age-class names: an anthropological debate

An *îtaana* is only recognised when it has been closed, given a proper name and it has a reputable nickname. These names contain embedded meanings about the social identity of the grouping. But names also ascribe a sociological, structural position to

the group which is contingent on their place in the entire generational system. Thus, for the following examples, the Ratanya *ndinguri*, initiated throughout 1946-47, eventually became known in central Tigania as *bibii*, or 'chewing gum' which was sold by the Pashtun traders in Mikinduri market at about the same time. Certainly of more global relevance than the parochial curiosity with chewing gum to the Tigania-Meru, the Lubeeta *kabeeria*, who formed a circumcision class in 1969 were immediately christened *Apollo* after the lunar landing of that year. In both examples, reappraisals of modernity are married to the cyclical naming and classification of *nthukî-mataana*. The individual nicknames given to different cohorts have been advantageous to historians, especially those studying historical processes amongst societies with complex, cyclical systems for identifying the order of age and generational class formation (Lamphear 1989: 239).

In contrast to the view presented here, other anthropologists have stressed the ephemeral character of names given to circumcision classes (Glazier 1976: 317; Peatrik 1999: 79). These authors point out that these nicknames are subjugated to structural time, especially where genealogical memory is shallow (cf. Fosbrooke 1956). In the Meru context, Peatrik (1999: 92-3) argues that the cyclic practice of naming *nthukî* and *îtaana*, girded up by a preestablished principle of repetitive names, ensures that each class's nickname is to be forgotten over time. Yet, among the generations still living such names offer glimpses of each group's historicity that survive as long as its protagonists are alive and sometimes even after they are gone (see Table 2). More importantly, however, these authors omit that it is not only the people who form age-classes which are subjected to historical transformations, but also the structures and principles which constrain them. Of course, it is reasonable to assume that proper names and nicknames may change over time (cf. Rigby 1983: 443). This is often the

case when a group advances in the life-course as a cohort and changes their social grade, as from warriors (*nthaka*) to married men or junior elders (*akûrû*).

The expressive dynamics of this process are revealed in the practice of naming *mataana* and *nthukî* with either structurally-defined proper names - as in Lubeeta, Miriti, Gwantai and so on - or through historically contingent nicknames, such as *Kîmwe*, *Apollo*, or *Trabûta* which refer idiomatically to historical events.

Gwantai		
<i>kabeeria</i>	1991	
<i>kobia</i>	1988	<i>Nthukî Ncabûka</i>
<i>ndinguri</i>	1983	
Miriti		
<i>kabeeria</i>	1981	<i>Nthukî Nkabûta</i>
<i>kobia</i>	1977	<i>Trabûta</i>
<i>ndinguri</i>	1973	<i>Kîmutu and Kîmwe</i>
Lubeeta		
<i>kabeeria</i>	1969	<i>Apollo</i>
<i>kobia</i>	1964	
<i>ndinguri</i>	1959	<i>Toyo</i>
Ratanya		
<i>kabeeria</i>	---	<i>Nyaga na mpûra</i>
<i>kobia</i>	---	
<i>ndinguri</i>	1946-1947	<i>Bibii</i>
Micubu		
<i>kabeeria</i>	1940	<i>Mûrikinyi</i>
<i>kobia</i>	1936	<i>Kûrobojwa</i>
<i>ndinguri</i>	1933	
Ithaliî		
<i>kabeeria</i>	1926-1927	<i>Mûthaura</i>
<i>kobia</i>	---	<i>Mwonjati and Gicûnoko</i>
<i>ndinguri</i>	1918-1919	<i>Mûriera</i>

Figure 4: Tigania and Igembe *nthukî* and their nicknames, 1918 - 1991

The formation of separate age-classes (*nthukî* or *riika*) and their accomplished status as generations (*rûcîara*) provokes, through their actions, specific historical reappraisals which are framed within a discourse on morality. These nicknames are playful to a degree, but often recall the community's appraisal of historical episodes which occurred during the period of time when a *nthukî* or *îtaana* was in formation.

Often, these are contingent events over which the age-class had no ostensible control, such as famines or economic crisis.

In the above table, the alternative names for Tigania *nthukî* are given in reverse chronological order. Each of these names evokes a structure of feeling about the particular identity of the *nthukî* represented. They also tell a story and hint at the historicity of each successive generation. The Miriti who were in formation from 1973 to 1981, for example, gained their initial nickname of *Kîmutu* or *Kîmwe* because of a drought which occurred in 1973 when the eldest and largest of the first circumcision groups, the *ndinguri*, were being initiated. *Kîmutu* and *kîmwe* are types of milled flour that the postcolonial government issued as emergency staples during the drought. Just as maize meal warded off famine in central Kenya in 1973, a more hopeful nickname was given in 1977 to the middle group of the Miriti, the *kobia*, when the events of the early seventies had resonance with a new drought and the advent of disco halls in Meru Town. This new group were nicknamed *Trabuta* in a clever word play on the idiom, *nthukî nkabûta* ('the exhausted generation') and a Meruisation of the name of the American actor, John Travolta, who starred in the film 'Saturday Night Fever.' *Gûkabûta* is the verb to be completely exhausted and *trabûta* became a slang word for platform disco shoes. In the Meru imaginary, the sight of young people climbing the hills and valleys of the Nyambene landscape in platform shoes, after dancing all night in the discotheque, in the middle of a drought, was a glimpse at some of the absurdities of the modernity appropriated by the youth of the 1970s. Likewise, their predecessors of the Lubeeta *kabeeria* were similarly called *toyo*, 'bar soap', because they laundered their clothing with scented detergents at their boarding schools. They were said to "stink." The use of this soap was an innovation in Meru. Other examples fit into this pattern of naming successively younger age-classes by imaginative clichés

which capture the irony of what Turgenev called ‘the new improved generation’ in his novel, *Fathers and Sons*. As mentioned above, the Ratanya *ndinguri* were called *Bibii*, ‘sweet chewing gum’, after sweets and other confectionary entered local diets. Likewise, the emergence of the Mîcûbû *kabeeria* from their initiations in 1940, wrapped up in blankets instead of nude and painted, led them to be named *Mûrikinyi*, ‘something new has arrived.’ In each of these creative names, the Meru imagination plays upon the materiality of each successive age-class’ experiences with new things.

Among the Imenti this semantic play is less emphasised than amongst the Nyambene communities, although nicknames have been employed to historicise a particular age-class in formation. The last Imenti *nthukî* was the Mûng’atîa *jwa-kilo* (‘surprise of the kilogramme’), which was initially ‘opened’ for recruitment in 1977 and has not been formally and publically ‘closed.’ This is an enormous group of young people ranging in age from adolescence to men and women in their late forties’. Compared to former Imenti age-classes, the Mûng’atîa have been ‘open’ for twenty-four years, about twice the period of time calibrated for the formation of *nthukî*. Where there was anticipation that a new age-class would be opened as late as 1990, this did not occur as a separate event, instigating a series of debates about the future viability of the *nthukî* in contemporary Imenti society. Many people interpret this long duration to be a sign that age-classes are no longer relevant to the Imenti.

Thus, there is a central ambivalence in naming *nthukî* as active reappraisals of their historicity. Through an array of constructed identities, the subjectivity of the *nthukî* is never clearly viewed and perceived as passive or active: it lies, relationally, in the betwixt and between. This ambivalence stems from the historicity of such names; they are negotiated in the presence of the *now*, but contested by the imaginations of what *once was* and *might be*. Although there is a passive dimension to naming specific

cohorts, particularly since the responsibility for approving such names often fell upon ageing and 'retiring' elders, it is the actions of the age-class concerned which provoke assessments of their moral character. The *now* of any present generation is compared to the *once was* of past cohorts, alongside the *might be* which the future holds up as a vague, generative possibility.

The identity of each successive age-class is contingent upon their recognition and exploitation of their own historicity. But this is not to construct each age cohort as encapsulated, bounded and autonomous subjects whose agency is without internal constraint or contradiction. As will be argued in the next chapter, the recognition of a generation's place in history is often no more mysterious than the stories it tells about itself, or, the autobiographies of its individual 'members', whose imaginative *a posteriori* reconstructions of history form the basis for a contested, but collective arena for interpreting their social identity.

CHAPTER THREE

The Generations Return: Meru rhetorics of history

The time is out of joint. The world is going badly. It is worn but its wear no longer counts. Old age or youth - one no longer counts in that way. The world has more than one age. We lack the measure of the measure. We no longer realise the wear, we no longer take account of it as of a single age in the progress of history. Neither maturation, nor crisis, nor even agony. Something else. What is happening is happening to age itself, it strikes a blow at the teleological order of history. What is coming, in which the untimely appears, is happening to time but it does not happen in time. Contretemps. *The time is out of joint...*[T]he age is off its hinges. Everything, beginning with time, seems out of kilter, unjust, dis-adjusted.

-Jacques Derrida

The aim of this chapter is to clarify a difficult Kîmerû term, *gîtîba*, which is an anachronism to many and a key word to a few. But *gîtîba* contains a double difficulty. Although I frequently encountered it in explanations of how age-classes were organised in the past, it was also heard to substitute for a number of other concepts such as a 'century', a 'cycle of generations', or a form of what anthropologists call 'dual organisation.' Almost unknown among young people, this particular term found a strong resonance when mentioned amongst elders, particularly those who had lived in the 1930s and 1940s. Its variation of usage seemed to be ambivalent rather than polyvalent, not only to me, but also to the Meru as well, such that a growing list of possible definitions and meanings were ascribed to the term. In short, an archaic terminology for a way of living now thought to have passed was briefly given new life as an imaginative result of the fieldwork encounter.

Gîtîba was, however, not a passive or a neutral term. Despite the existence of alternative concepts like the 'century' which encompassed the entirety of the

chronology since the Meru were conquered in 1908, evocation of the term *gîtîba* had the effect, among some Meru, of making this chronology their own. Local exegeses about the meanings of *gîtîba* led me to see the rhetorical play upon key concepts within attempts to put local histories into perspective. There were alternative ways of grasping time as biographical, historical, and allegorical. Coming to the conclusion that many of the stories and biographies which entered into my fieldnotes required reading alongside Meru theories of time and historical consciousness, it became clear that Eurocentric understandings about the same would be insufficient and distorting.

I found this concept, *gîtîba*, a mystifying problem and eventually summed up my confusion as an outcome of ignorance. My faltering Kîmerû confounded this mystery. *Gîtîba* was an abstraction, what the anthropological literature might gloss as a ‘dual classification’ or ‘dual organisation’, but I found local explanations of its meanings wildly divergent. This presented a problem because I was aware that exegesis may contradict what people do and think they do in their social lives. Since ethnographic study is processual and carried out through social relationships and interactions, this concept presented a challenge to meld symbolic constructions with observations of everyday life. It was surprising to speak with a self-styled ‘modern’ man, a ‘Revolutionary Meru Man’ as one man called himself, who would describe historical process as the return of generations, a recursive concept of history which clashes with that formulated in European historicism. In talking about *gîtîba*, I found myself in the situation of asking people such an obtuse and heavy question as ‘What is History?’ Unsurprisingly, this resulted in an array of possible answers, few of which could be related directly to my overall ambition to represent a history of Meru age-class formation. It did not really matter, however, for no such total history is possible in the arena of interpretation which is called ethnography. The important task

is to demonstrate that everyone's past is different.

Everyone's past is different: '*Kila mtu ana zamani yake*'

Sitting on a neatly woven carpet of grass, cooled in the shade cast by an enormous, rustling stand of bamboo, I strained to follow a conversation in Kîmerû which altered the course of my fieldwork in Nyambene and, arguably, forged the main tension of this thesis. Since the eureka moment is a rarity in anthropological fieldwork, the dialogue emerging from this particularly engaging discussion lead me to consider a Meru concept of history, or more precisely, an expression of different people's historicity.

We had been discussing the Kîmerû concept, *gîtîba*, at my request. By 'we', I mean to specify that I struggled to make sense of a lively banter between Kailanyi, Amos, and Kîboore, men who belonged to different *nthukî*, or age-classes, but who were all, in one way or another, passionate and competitive about their respective cultural knowledge. These were, in the jargon of ethnography, key informants in the sense that they indulged me by taking my obtuse questions somewhat seriously. In Kîmerû, however, they had a specific word, *mûgwatî*, which described their relation to me. Anyone seen to be moving about with me, speaking with me, or introducing me to others was my *mûgwatî*: those 'holding' me (from the verb, *kûgwata*, to hold, get, sponsor). This rang truer, in my mind, than words like 'informant' or 'research assistant' because it stressed my dependence on my Meru interlocuters and friends. Literally, my 'catchers' - the same term for the sponsor of a neophyte during their circumcisions - these men made it a personal responsibility to guide, mould, and initiate me into their world of contested local knowledge.

Amos sat squat with his thighs hard up against his chest. His comportment seemed explosive, as if he were preparing to jump up in protest. He was, however, listening intently to Kailanyi explain the notion of *gîtîba*, the older man emphasising one point after another by casting down tiny blades of grass he had plucked. Naming the Meru age-classes from Igembe and Tigania, Kailanyi spoke rhythmically;

*'Kiramunya aciârîre Mîcûbû...
 Mîcûbû aciârîre Lubeeta...
 Lubeeta aciârîre Gwantai,
 îndî rî,
 Ithaliî aciârîre Ratanya...
 Ratanya aciârîre Miriti...
 Miriti aciârîre Gîcunge,
 kwî nthukî ijîlî cîonthe tî gîtîba' ²⁵*

Kailanyi used the verb to beget, *gûcîara*, in both its genealogical and social meanings when outlining the successive relations between all the age-classes, or in other words, between social 'fathers' and 'sons.' Kailanyi did not have to strain to convey the basic principles which gave rise to the concept of *gîtîba*. The Ithaliî are the 'fathers' of the Ratanya, who are in turn the 'fathers' of the Miriti, who are in their time, the 'fathers' of the Gîcunge. All of these men belong to one *gîtîba*. This group of 'fathers' and 'sons' are distinguished from their opposite *gîtîba* by classifying these men as Ntangi. The opposite *gîtîba*, the 'fathers' and 'sons' of Kiramunya, Mîcûbû, Lubeeta, and Gwantai, are called Mbaine. Taking the relationship between the Kiramunya and the Mîcûbû as fathers and sons as a starting point, an intermediate *nthukî* is formed between these two, in this case the Ithaliî, but this adjacent age-class belongs to another generational 'moiety' or *gîtîba*. In the Nyambene Range, there are only eight possible proper names for their age-classes. Once each of these eight age-classes has been named it is 'time' to recycle their names once more. The names are said to be

²⁵ (Kiramunya begot Mîcûbû...Mîcûbû begot Lubeeta...Lubeeta begot Gwantai, but Ithaliî begot Ratanya...Ratanya begot Miriti... Miriti begot Gîcunge, from all these two generation-classes is [*gîtîba*]).

recycled every hundred years or so. For example, the recent initiates of 2003 were not yet officially named as a *nthukî*, but they are widely referred to as the Gîcunge, the 'return' of the grouping initiated at the beginning of the twentieth century. This earlier Gîcunge are still within living memory, but once the new initiates come into formation and acquire their own reputation, the defunct Gîcunge ("*Gîcunge ba ntene*") will be said to have been 'reborn' ("*nthukî cîawe jwacoka*") in the subjectivities of the young Gîcunge circumcised in the early 2000s. In terms of their genealogical relation, most of the former Gîcunge would be the deceased great-grandfathers (*kîojûûjû*) of today's Gîcunge youths. The names of the *nthukî* are recycled every fourth genealogical generation, which is also constitutive of eight social generations. Although Kiramunya is the name of an age-class in formation from around 1899 to about 1915, the last survivors of this grouping dying in the mid-1970s, it is a name which is expected to 'return' in the next decade, providing that such a practice remains viable among the Meru. While this is the sociological understanding of *gîûba*, people actually use this word in a variety of contexts. Listening to Kailanyi's explanations, he suggested that *gîûba* refers to both the two generational 'moieties' of fathers and sons, as well as the period of time in which the recycling of names occurs.

Between Kailanyi and Amos erupted a long dialogue. In faint comprehension, I noted the anglicised Swahili word *historia* repeatedly, alongside a repertoire of famines, diseases, wars and rituals which were said to have occurred in the time of such and such an age-class. I wrote down fragments of conversation: "*û Mîcûbû barûûîre bara îjîlî*"; 'it was certainly Mîcûbû who went to the Second War.' Using particular references to exceptional, sometimes traumatic past and present events or episodes, the age-classes named above became protagonists in hours of story telling. Age-classes and not individuals became the actors in the rhetorical construction of

history. Kailanyi tried to explain that the old people, those who had been children during the early years of imperial rule (1908 - 1926), often invoked events which bore no recall in the experiences of those who were younger than they.

“My father’s father saw Kang’ang’i build this road over Nyambene, but he was not the first white man to be seen. There was this one people from Kamatune called Limanyangû. He passed through Mîkinduri with a white woman. But Kang’ang’i is the one the old people remember. He brought money. When he came he was the same age as the Gîcunge and they were his sponsors. M’Iminuiki of Kianjai was his spokesman. M’Iminuiki sent Gîcunge warriors throughout Tigania and Igembe to tell the old and young not to shout at and fear this white man. It was common to pass news that Kang’ang’i was coming by crying ‘ûû-uu-ii!’ and the people hid from him and his entourage, not liking the looks of them. Among these Gîcunge, the ones in his employ, Kang’ang’i made them wear the white man’s clothing. Later, he ordered the young warriors and maidens to visit him in Mûtindwa and dance for him. He gave them cloth, hoes, machetes, and salt as payment. The girls that he liked were given glass beads. My father was an Ithaliî and he went to Nyeri once to dance for the whites. He was the first Meru to see an airplane. They were ordered to wear loin cloths. Imagine, for eight days of dancing in Nyeri, these Ithaliî were exempted from paying taxes for eight years! Neither Ithaliî, nor Kiramunya went out to work. It was Mîcûbû who were called to work. In the old days, the Meru were upright people.”

For these elders, they could speak of a time “*îndîra tene ya acunkû atîrîîjî*”, or before the white man came. Stories often began with this phrase, and ended with the moral punctuation that life had been more authentic, more enriching, and more ordered before the white man’s coming. His own father, Kailanyi explained, had been a real man, not like the imitations of men that had been born after his own generation. To emphasise this moralising version of history, Kailanyi suggested that the Meru had left one *gîtîba* and were entering another. Things had run their course. The initiation of the Gîcunge in the early 2000s had already led to gossip about their inauthenticity. “They know nothing of our culture”, is one frequently heard complaint; while others ask in exasperation, “What is the world coming to?” Spoken of as mere shadows of their former namesakes by many elders, the contemporary Gîcunge represent a kind of historical comparison between a world which now only exists in the imagination of

elder men and women. Such comments suggest not only the coming of a new age, a new *gĩtĩba*, and the return of past *nthukĩ*, but an indirect comparison of the weight of today's events, its changes and uncertainties, to those which occurred on the volatile threshold of the precolonial and imperial periods.

Picking up from Kailanyi's claims about the authenticity of their ancestors, Amos gestured to both Kĩboore and myself, telling us that we were "*faki*" (fakes) because we had been born after "Lancaster House", a clear reference to the 1963 negotiations of Kenya's political independence in a London office block. Elsewhere in Kenya, especially in urban Nairobi, young people born immediately after 1964, during President Kenyatta's reign, are referred to as the '*Uhuru* Generation.' Because the 'younger generations' could not remember the struggle for freedom, Amos concurred, they couldn't possibly understand the depravity of the white man's rule. Then came the insightful comment. In Swahili, Amos imposed a remarkably referential idea, suggesting that "*kila mtu ana zamani yake*": Everybody has their own past.

If it had not been for the striking way in which Meru conceptions of history differed from my own, this conversation may have remained no more significant than a hasty jotting in a grimy notebook. As I recall it, however, this conversation left me with a newly expanded horizon about the problem of historical perspective in Meru social life. I was suddenly reminded of an undefinable gap of historical experience which separates parents from their children. At the same time, however, I wondered whether this observation had more poignancy among people organising themselves through age-classes and generation. Thinking about the notion of *gĩtĩba*, I wrote a footnote in my diary that night:

[T]he past is a ever-shifting point of reference... there is need for more refined descriptions of how the historical and mythic are intertwined with successive generations... what is *gĩtĩba* if not ahistorical? Why does this bug me so much?

(*author's field diary*, May 21st, 2002)

Why did my Meru informants emphasise the relational aspects of historical experience over blow-by-blow accounts of History? Multiple and often contradictory, many conversations about the past seemed to weigh upon the present, as in Kailanyi's critique of how today's youth lacked the stoicism which defined the Meru in the past; or Amos' comparison to *faki* young people as cheap radios which broke within a few weeks' use. Amos clearly perceived a cheapening effect of modernisation as experienced in Meru.

There was a tension at the edges of age and generational categories which highlighted the status of local history as some kind of reflection upon social organisation. What emerged from my encounter with Kailanyi and Amos was the linkage between historicity and the problem of generational time in the Meru context, at least, as it was sociologically situated during fieldwork from 2001-2003. In other words, this brief fieldwork encounter pointed to the ways in which historical consciousness was implicated in differing forms of social relations. In Meru, the specific forms of social organisation that took on historical meaning were based on local constructions of difference through age, gender and generation. Because the formation of age-classes is a prominent feature of Meru social life, their historical consciousness is subsequently expressed in the rhetorics of what may be called a generational consciousness. Although in this thesis I focus on age-class formation, as a means through which to engage ethnographically with historical narratives as they are told by Meru, the real tension which ties all the materials together is the problem of historical perspective. More specifically, the tension which occurs to the Meru is the historicity of generation.

In order to give a rough appreciation of what is meant by the historicity of

generation, the subject of this chapter, I might preface it by examining this particular fieldwork encounter in more depth. Through describing the relations between Kailanyi, Amos, Kîboore in terms of their respective age-class positions, I aim to contextualise how generation is frequently called upon in everyday encounters in Meru to express difference and otherness. It is the alterity within Meru concepts of generation which give particular cohorts the language to bring themselves together. I will, also, reflect briefly on my position as a foreign interloper. I do this, primarily, to counter the ethnographic language often used in the past to describe East African 'age-organisations' as monolithic and ahistorical structures. Instead, I would wish to offer, at least, a different rationale for writing about age-class formation and generationally based social organisation as enduring anthropological problems. That rationale has much to do with the politics of knowledge in which anthropologists are willing participants.

Three lifetimes: situating the problem of historical perspective

My relation to Kailanyi was the most tenuous, partially because the basis of our intersubjectivity was rooted in Kîmerû, a language which challenged me and often overwhelmed me in its idiomatic richness. I spoke Swahili with Amos, mostly, and English with Kîboore. Although I could not deny the obvious divisions rooted in race and class categories, there were other, locally significant differences which separated Kailanyi from me. At about seventy years of age, Kailanyi was a member of the Ratanya age-class, a peer group of ageing men whose *nthukî* (age-class) was in formation throughout the period, 1946-1956. Because I was, at this point in the fieldwork process, assigned to belong with the Gwantai, those youth currently in their

late twenties' to early thirties' and who were initiated during the years 1983-1991, this man represented a person for whom I would be expected to pay deference towards, as a member of the 'Fathers of the Country' (*beethe ba nthũ*). They are also known as the 'Owners of the Country' (*eene ba nthũ*), since most of these elder men are household heads (*mwene*). As a generalisation, these Ratanya monopolised certain economic rights and privileges, such as land ownership, lines of credit, and co-operative marketing society membership which gave them some control over the aspirations of many younger men, as well as over their wives and daughters.

Indeed, I found the most difficulty positioning myself and getting my fieldwork done among this category of ageing men. Firstly, there was a principle of avoidance between men of my age and elder men of the age of the Ratanya. Or, at least, there was such a principle in the time of these elders' youth. This avoidance may be seen as showing deference and respect, but it also reflects the fear which age based hierarchies can instill in both the old and the young. Rooted in the respective position of differentially aged men, the careful, deferential approaches of the young towards the older reinforce an oft cited ideal espousing the worth of avoidance between parental and filial generations. Often the capriciousness of elders towards a man of my age and social category takes on a theatrical element, because this behaviour seems to play between real ire and some form of performative stance. In a similar vein, the back-biting and gossip mongering of younger men towards their elders was a common practice, although many of these complaints were impossible to substantiate or prove. Because open conflict between the ages is carefully avoided, many elements of inter-generational conflict were sublimated to stereotypic complaints; such that youth could complain that "These elders and their *njuri* just want to eat" in echo with the elders saying, "The problem with youth today is that they want to starve us."

There were, certainly, sociologically complicated questions to ask about these particular and volatile relationships between the young and the old. Was this, putatively, an outward expression of their gerontocratic power? Or, did it arise because the Gwantai would be permitted to marry the social 'daughters' of the Ratanya? Was feigned irascibility a means of initiating some kind of respectful relationship?

In retrospect, my attempts to form relationships with these elder men was frequently the locus of a peculiar misunderstanding. In Kîmerû, the methodological term, *rapport*, might have been more accurately glossed as *rûgambia*, which is reserved for discussions with fathers about the courtship and marriage of their daughters. For some men, marriage was a way through which I could 'become' Meru, a desire they took as self-evident from my interest in their way of living, their language, and their history. The potentiality of being an in-law to these elder men, meant the cultivation of 'shyness', *nthoni*, a composure much valued as a quality of personhood among Meru. When a Meru tells another, "*karaga nthoni!*" ('be humble!'), it is a kind of gentle chastisement to stay in one's place and accept the hierarchial scheme of things. Any extraverted efforts to form relationships with these men ran the risk of being viewed as aggressive and pushy. The only soft way towards knowing this age-class of men was to wait for them to initiate a dialogue.

Ideals for behaviour in Meru are very age sensitive, such that adopting a passive stance towards one's elders is appropriately seen as accepting one's subjunctive status to them. One is never allowed to be seen to bristle with anger amongst one's elders. To verbally abuse an older person is an offence with no known excuses. One's own age-mates are responsible for such a breach of civility and are charged with meting out the punishment. Until fairly recently, young men could be



Plate 5: Alternate generations: grandparents and grandchildren (2001)

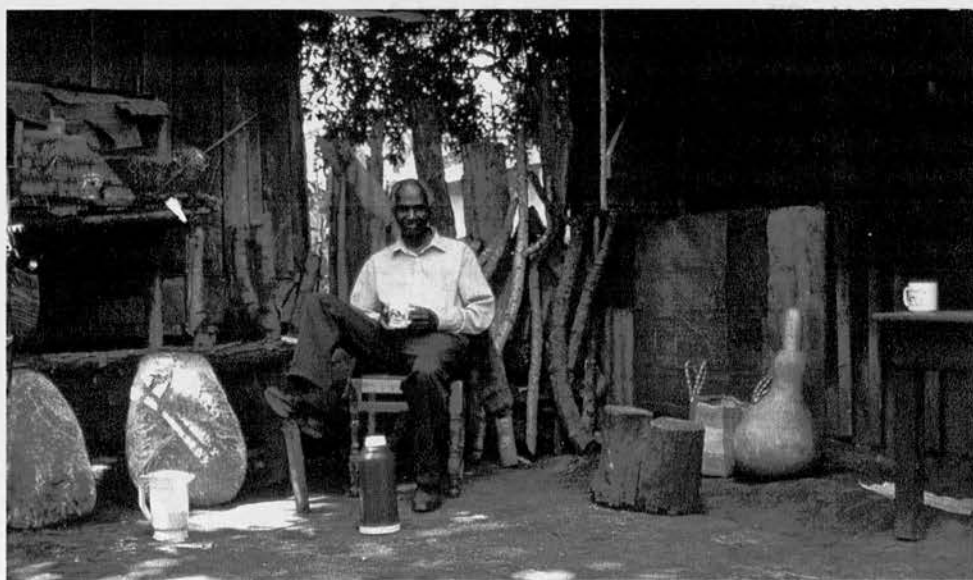


Plate 6: Adjacent generation: a social 'father' in mid-life (2001)

beaten with poisonous thorns by their cohort, or, forced to run through a gauntlet of blows as punishment for abusing an elder, especially a social 'mother.' On an experiential level, such ideals revealed forms of ageism in both my thinking and that of my Meru interlocuters. Whereas in European and North American thinking, ageism pertains to images of and ideas about 'growing old' and entering physical and mental decline, among other things, in some parts of Africa, such as Kenya, a more pervasive ageism also characterises youth as a time of intemperance, immaturity, and laziness. Once, for example, a Ratanya rebuked me for asking him questions about the past, arguing that if I was truly interested in 'reading' Meru cultural history, that is to study it, "you should stop being lazy and read the books already written in the library, instead of bothering us old men!" With time, I gave in to the Meru age and generational hierarchy, even though I never felt wholly at home with it. As such, I learned to work with the expectations of 'shyness' and quietly put to work my biographical understandings of this cohort.

Yet, Kailanyi was an exception because far from avoiding younger men, he felt it was his moral duty to teach them. He sat with Amos - a categorical 'son' to the Ratanya - on many occasions because they agreed together that their community was in turmoil. Sometimes their dialogue assumed the language of conspiracy. Our intersubjectivity, although impaired by my faltering and arduously spoken Kîmerû, was bridged by long sessions of conversation, interspersed by singing and silences, where I sat patiently and listened intently. In groups of three or four, these meetings often lasted into the darkness of early evening, inspired by the convivial chewing of *miraa* (*catha edulis*), with dialogue switching back and forth in Kîmerû, Swahili and English.

It was Amos, over many long months, who cultivated a particular zeal for

argument, polemics and a generosity of opinion in his relation with me. It is this specific kind of generosity with local knowledge which anthropologists have always relied upon in their field studies. Sometimes this can be a form of competition, but with Amos I judged that his debates and arguments were born of disquiet with the inequalities he had suffered in life, rather than an attempt to impose his will and views upon another.

A former convict who converted to Islam in the late 1980s, Amos was a member of the *nthukî* Miriti, men who are in their late thirties' to early fifties' and who were initiated between 1973-1981. Locally, he had to live down constant rumours about his criminality, but I found him to be secretly admired, even feared, for his reputation as a rehabilitated gangster. Some people thought I was foolhardy or brave, probably both, to have Amos as one of my *mûgwatî*. Amos greatly admired the warrior-hero figure in Meru folktales and allegories, the *ncamba*, but insisted that such persons no longer exist. On one occasion, he told me, "In the past, Meru had three kinds of great men, the braves (*ncamba*), the orator (*mûgambî*) and the benefactor (*gîtonga*). Today, there are only the rich." Amos strove, somehow, to embody each of these figures in his relation to others, as if carried by some moral imperative. To all who spoke about him - behind his back - lay a tacit respect for this angry figure who had been jailed for six years, but not crushed by the penal system. He was, to me, something of a rebel. His imaginative political visions embraced a kind of millenarian neo-traditionalism. He told elaborate yarns about the exploits and defeats of the Mau Mau, even though he was an infant in the 1950s. His father had fought the British and Loyalists in the Mount Kenya and Nyambene forests during the Emergency (1952-1955), before returning to Tigania, unscathed, to plant the massive bamboo grove towering above us. His biographical link to struggle in Kenya was a prominent feature

of his politics, convinced that *uhuru* (independence) had died at Lancaster House in London and that the Meru had perished when the government created its own version of the *njuri nceke* (select council of elders).²⁶ Although he had left primary school before his leaving certificate, Amos was - to borrow Gramsci's famous phrase - an 'organic intellectual', who was acutely critical of his country's political leadership and the vicissitudes of postcolonial Kenya.

Amos was not only framed as my 'catcher', but was also of the age of men who were considered the 'daylight fathers' (*beethe ba mûthenya*) of all Gwantai. Each age-class forms itself through relationships with older youth, usually of the *nthukî* adjacent to their own, who are known as their 'daylight fathers.' With me somewhat under his tutelage, I found my relations to men like him growing increasingly subjunctive: that is, I became much more passive than was personally comfortable, but this was, in itself, one of the ways through which my research could be conducted. Deference became a question of social access. Whereas Kailanyi was of the generation generally thought of today to be the 'Fathers of the Country' (*beethe ba nthî*), that of Amos' *nthukî* related to more junior positions, but both were constructed through the idiom of fatherhood, exemplified by the 'daylight fathers' or the 'Fathers of the Country.' The *beethe ba mûthenya* were those persons of an immediately senior age-class which act as a model for those younger than them. As Kîboore came to explain it, "these daylight fathers are your cultural fathers, where you learn how to speak and how to dress... but they are not the ones holding you when you face the knife, these are your catchers and they are like older brothers." The idioms of kinship were implicit in the explanations given for the relationships between people based on age, generation, and spousal classification.

²⁶ See Chapter Four on the policies of indirect rule and the cooption of the *njuri nceke* in colonial governmentality.

This expanded definition of fatherhood is pivotal to understanding the 'dualism' at play in the concept of *gîtîba*. It was Kîboore who explained to me that it's a preference to be initiated into the *nthukî* aligned with that of one's parental generation; "that of your own father." This meant, in the language of anthropology, that some form of principle called 'dual organisation' could be discerned from people's concern for initiating their sons into their own *gîtîba* category. This is what Kailanyi had been calling *gîtîba*, when he began to chant the names of *nthukî* filiated as fathers and sons. Kîboore's father was a Ratanya, but Kîboore's mother was a younger second wife (*mwîru*) and he had been initiated into Miriti at a precocious age in 1981, on his father's insistence. It was important to Kîboore's father that his son 'belong' to his *gîtîba*. To the extent that fathers feel great pride in their own *gîtîba*, or speak about the potential danger of initiating one's own sons into their opposite *gîtîba*, stories about past rivalries between these groupings of men continue to be told despite the growing sentiment among a minority of fathers that such prescriptions are old fashioned. For these other men, what matters is that their sons are circumcised, without particular stress on which 'generation class' they are initiated into. Anne-Marie Peatrik described this social division among the Meru as generation 'fractions' (Peatrik 1999: 80-4) while other ethnographers have described these as 'alternation generations' (Almagor 1983; Simonse 1992). Whatever terminology anthropologists superimpose upon such forms of organisation, which do seem to 'alternate' between categories of fathers and sons, it would do better to understand these as models or ideals for organising, rather than hard-and-fast rules about social life.

In Meru, the emphasis on maintaining these social divisions is now a matter of negotiation and personal choice. Kîboore represented a unique case, because his father was adamant about initiating his son into Ntangi and their *gîtîba* at such a young age.

In providing a reason for insisting that Kîboore be initiated as an 'under aged' youth, Kîboore's father declared that he believed his sons would perish if they were not initiated into the Miriti. Latterly, Kîboore suggested that initiating him into the Miriti was his father's priority because the ageing man did not want to appear to have fathered many sons late into life who would be initiated as Gwantai. Kîboore could only have been included in his father's generation class by being initiated at the age of eleven, a precocious age to be circumcised by any comparison, the normal age currently about fourteen to sixteen years of age. His younger male siblings, he explained, were initiated *mwongela*, that is to say that they were circumcised at convenience as nominal Miriti, but after this age-class had ceased to recruit new initiates. Because of this, Kîboore's *mwongela* siblings did not have the status that he enjoyed within his father's younger children. Like Kîboore, they would be the contemporaries of the Gwantai, people who were just beginning to marry in the mid-1990s. Their Ratanya father, Kîboore explained, would have been embarrassed to have sons of differing ages and spread out between two adjacent age-classes. Amongst the elder man's peers, the Ratanya, it was common for their sons to be spread out or 'mixed' between two *gîtîba*, even though it was undesirable. It was better for him to appear to be a man who was particularly blessed with a large number of children born closely together than to appear as a man whose reproductive period exceeded those of his age-mates and their spouses.

The lifetimes of these three 'key informants' only partially overlapped. Despite their fundamental zeal for discussing their cultural history, these men all had significantly different points of view about life and interpreted the topics raised in conversation from their own perspective. Not only did these men belong to different generations, but their position in the life-course and their personhood were also

differentiated. As such, the topics they thought important enough to remember, and share with me, spoke of the subtle problems of perspective a historian faces in any kind of reconstruction of past subjectivities.

Kailanyi, for example, remembers debating with his cohort around 1947 whether they should revive the practice of living in their *gaarû cîa nthaka*, a kind of warrior's barracks, during their bachelorhood. This house was abandoned by the previous *nthukî*, the Mîcûbû *kabeeria*, because of the effects of the Second World War upon their older members who went abroad and came back with new ideas about how to live. Ratanya not only decided not to persist with the *gaarû cîa nthaka*, except during initiations, but in an unprecedented change they also began to live in the same houses with their wives. Whatever their individual views, this decision to cohabit with their spouses contributed to a lasting perception that the Ratanya were spoilers of tradition. More than this, however, the Ratanya brought new practices into their married lives which earned them reputations for being both fecund, in the positive sense, and promiscuous, in the negative. Cohabitation was ultimately one answer to the colonial system of hut taxation, where separate houses for husbands, wives, and initiated children were enumerated for higher tax payments. With a repressive system of migrant labour already in place, Ratanya and their spouses, the Ncûlûbi, began to build larger conjugal houses to live in, despite the fact that many men were away from home more or less permanently. The multigenerational and conjugal house set the pattern for today's couples' homes. However, the Ratanya also stressed an ambition towards having more children and abandoning many of the strict rules and practices surrounding reproduction, such as birth spacing, child control (infanticide and abortion), and ending the birth of subsequent children at the time a couple's oldest children were circumcised. In the 1950s, a kind of 'sexual revolution' of sorts took

place in the Nyambene's, although it probably occurred in Imenti at an earlier time (cf. Chege 1993; Thomas 2003). Kailanyi's age-class, the Ratanya, were of such ill repute in the opinion of their elders that they were given the nickname *Nyaga na Mpûa*, which means to be inconsiderate of the proper way of doing things, a "don't care" generation, not without resonance with the reputation of today's youths. Today, of course, these men are elders and their opinions are considered to be conservative by those of younger age-classes.

Amos' age-class, the Miriti, formed in the postcolonial period and particularly during a period of time when the Nyambene communities were beginning to feel the first effects of economic downturn and dramatic swings in agricultural profits. The major internal debates among the Miriti were about how to satisfy the constraints of 'tradition' while surviving in an increasingly precarious 'modern' economy. The alternations this age-class made to bridewealth payments (*rûracio*) and other social exchanges between affines, in particular, led to greater personal 'freedoms' but more conflicts between parental and filial generations. Platform shoes, denim jackets, sunglasses, earrings, and flaired trousers earned them vitriol from their elders. Closely associated with their new subjectivity was a kind of social anger which produced new forms of criminality. Not for the first time in Meru history, small gangs of armed youth conducted raids upon members of their own communities. Whereas in the past, young Meru warriors would seek out cattle in their raids to build up animals for bridewealth payment, the new raiders had no clearly defined intent which left the public baffled about stories of senseless murders. But the Miriti, later in life, also became the main thrust behind a kind of millenarian movement in the Nyambenes, fuelled by the small profits and hope which the booming trade in *miraa* encouraged. These men are no longer feared as criminals, or dismissed for their 'modern' fashion



Plate 7: Bakari and Nkatha: studio portrait of Miriti, 'nthukî trabûta'

sense, but are respectable junior elders who are now initiating their sons and lobbying to join the ranks of councils such as the *bîama* and *njuri* (see Chapter Four).

Kîboore, a Miriti, but much younger than Amos, was a high school teacher posted by the national teacher's union to teach in Tigania. Kîboore's sense of modernity and of self-imposed alienation from tradition rested upon a primary contradiction: he was also passionate about Meru's cultural history. Like his older counterparts in Kailanyi and Amos, however, he had no unequivocal definition of what constituted 'tradition' or 'modernity', these being the most problematic key words in public debates. Kîboore was a contemporary with the Gwantai and shared much of the same dressing, speech, and aspirations as members of this age-class. Most of the Gwantai are in their early thirties or late twenties. They have appropriated many of the elements of the globalisation of the 1990s, including fashion, music, and the desire for travel and experiences outside of Africa. Amongst this group, there is a profound taste for the *otherness* of Afro-American styles of dress and speech. Many had active imaginations and fantasies about "flying away" where they see themselves affording the consumption patterns of the "rich countries" of Europe and North America, particularly the United States where quite a number of young Meru have immigrant relatives. For a small minority of this age-class, especially those circumcised in clinics and members of a declining "middle-class", a sense of pessimism about "African culture" prevails. A major 'critical event' in their lifetime, the rapes and murders of schoolgirls at St. Kizito's High School, contributed to this group's polarisation around the question of the merits of tradition as authenticity and the traps of modernity as alienation. Their historicity is very much still in the making, but the events of 1991, when Gwantai youth participated in a shocking and traumatic destruction of the notion of community, remain with this cohort as the defining

moment in their young lifetimes.

Key words and the rhetoric of historical knowledge

I spoke to many people about *gîtîba* and while it was not a surprise to find that it was a contentious notion, I was sometimes disheartened by the very looseness I encountered with every attempt to explain the concept. I felt frustration that, unlike Anne-Marie Peatrik, I could not carry out a sociology of ‘dual organisation’ or ‘generation classes’, because *gîtîba* did not refer to any particular thing in the ethnographic present, but a cluster of ideas which clearly meant something different in the past. A novice ethnographer brings certain expectations with them to the field. One of these expectations is that the people one ‘studies’ will speak about their lives in such a way that their meanings and intentions will be clear to all. Our ‘informants’ will not lie, we presume, nor will they confuse the imaginary with the real. These may very well be unreasonable expectations, but the idea that every ‘culture’ has its own ‘truth’ is a pervasive myth for beginner fieldworkers. We search for ‘key words’ to unlock the secrets and mysteries of all the tacit things which escape our ken. One gropes about in the field seeking clarity on topics dreamt up in the ethnographic imagination, but often the objects of this research are less tangible in reality than in the pages of an ethnographic monograph with its figures, charts, and empirical prose. *Gîtîba* was one such topic which emphasised the idea that culture is an arena of interpretation and an historically shifting one at that. Retrospectively, I am convinced that ‘dual organisation’ only influences Meru social life when crisis within the community provoke the need to have a language in which to discuss matters historically. Nevertheless, asking informants about the term had the result of eliciting

many diverging understandings of its place in social life. I was left with the possibility that the many explanations of *gîtîba* provided glimpses of an indigenous rhetorics of history. But placing one interpretation above the array of others posed a fundamental question. How does one interrelate differing definitions of concepts such that they clarify rather than confuse?

In the following passages, this question is explored through descriptions of a number of situations in which the term, *gîtîba*, was given widely contrasting meanings. This is not to argue that exegesis was random. There were limits to what people could suggest and these limits pertained to interpretations of social organisation, on the one hand, and measurements of time on the other. The ambivalence at the heart of this concept was what lent it its particular flexibility and breadth as part of the rhetorics of historical knowledge. When followed closely, *gîtîba* stood as a kind of explanation that there are cycles or patterns to be observed in Meru history. The primary rhetoric was that generations 'return' after a predetermined period of time. Although this may appear exotic, on closer analysis, there is a familiar overlap with some European ways of historical thinking. Hayden White (1973) spoke of such rhetorics as the basis of what he called 'metahistory.' An example comes from Marxist economists, such as Samir Amin (1998), who argued that capitalist production and accumulation went through seven year cycles of 'boom' and 'bust.' Inscribed in everyday understandings of history, many persons employ the cliché 'history is doomed to repeat itself' when they perceive analogies between past and present events. Likewise, the oscillation between categories of Meru fathers and sons, the *gîtîba* of Mbaine and Ntangi, are ascribed with values not too distant from the ideas of 'boom' and 'bust', although these are interpreted within local idioms of 'peace' and 'war', 'rain' and 'sun', 'flourish' and 'drought', as well as a 'time for animals' and a 'time for people.' Some

of these are described in greater details below.

In Kaelo market, Laare Division, when I was looking for a suitable fieldsite, it was recommended that I seek out a well-known, erudite elder - a Ratanya *ndinguri* - who would, it was promised, tell me everything I needed to know about *nthukî* in the Nyambenes. When he was finally encountered and the purpose of my visit explained, he produced a thin ethnographic volume on the Kalenjin, an ethnic cluster on the western Rift valley, and demonstrated that the Nyambene age-class system was identical to that of the Kipsigis or Pokot.²⁷ The poignant proof was a single diagram depicting a cyclical system of generational alternations, four in number with a total of eight separate and recurrent age-classes. I stared at two circles said to represent an 'age organisation.' Taken together, he claimed, this was *gîtîba*. As we sat back to digest this analysis, I thought about how ethnographic abstractions could reduce the vagaries and ambivalences of cultural knowledge to the simplicity of a diagram or a flow-chart. More than this, however, the presentation of a book as the measure of authority appeared absurd to me. Coached by the myth of the 'key informant' in fieldwork, the idea that an ageing man might resort to 'book knowledge' to answer the questions of the visiting ethnographer was a contradictory possibility.²⁸ Certainly anthropologists have commented on such situations before and is now part of the stock jokes an anthropologist might tell their friends or students. The image of the stumped 'informant' consulting a book by famous ethnographer x or y to answer another ethnographer's questions about such-and-such a 'custom' is now a familiar trope.

²⁷ The ethnic term 'Kalenjin' was coined after a vernacular Kipsigis radio programme which began with the salutation 'I hear you!', a common greeting among Kipsigis speakers. Today, the Kalenjin refer to Nandi, Kipsigis (or Kipsikis), Tugen, Marakwet, Pokot, and Keiyo peoples who live in the Rift Valley and speak closely intelligible languages.

²⁸ The mythic quality of the elder as 'key informant' is particularly acute with those carrying out fieldwork in African societies. Perhaps this can be traced historically to the figure of the elder as an archetype of Marcel Griaule's relationship to Ogotemmeli. Likewise, Jan Vansina's quip 'A dying elder is like a library on fire' has contributed to this archetype.

What mattered in my encounter with this kind of game was that the small 'Peoples of Kenya' book provided a template for discussion between a Meru and a 'white.' Perhaps this description of *gîtîba* as a social structure mirrored colonial preoccupations with 'institutions' and 'organisations.' Whatever the case, this particular man managed to quell the interpretive difficulties of explaining *gîtîba* by showing me a diagram which had been produced by a European imagination.

The extent to which overlapping conceptions of time and history have modified current definitions of *gîtîba* demonstrate its actual resilience within historical processes, rather than its obscurity. Among younger people, where knowledge of *gîtîba* was fragmented, the diversity of explanations given revealed how the term could be used to explain the chronology of environmental or ecological events. When asked about *gîtîba*, many younger, school educated informants responded as if I had quizzed them on the meteorological properties of drought, discussing topics as variable as over-population and de-forestation. The *gîtîba* known as Mbaine, inclusive of the age-classes Ithaliî, Rantanya, Miriti, and Gîcunge, was associated with droughts (*mîpara*) and pestilence (*mîrumo jau*). A number of older informants insisted that droughts occurred more often when intiates of this 'moiety' were in seclusion, using as evidence the famines of the period 1918-1927 when the three successive *mataana* of Ithaliî were in formation. These famines were referred to as *Kîaramûû* in 1918-1919 ('blistering sun' drought), *Kîrîanduara* in 1921 (the famine of 'eating leather'), and the locust invasions of 1926, known as the 'locust hunger' (*mpara ya ngigi*). The 'sons' of Ithaliî, the Ratanya, became associated with two additional famines, *Kaunankû* (the 'selling firewood' famine) in 1946 and *Gatandûgû* (the 'Got no kin' famine) in the following year. The 'sons' of Ratanya, the Miriti, in turn experienced the famine of 1973 known as the 'flour famine' (*Kîmûtû* or *Kîmwe*) and another smaller drought in

1977 which gave rise to the imaginative nickname of the Miriti *kobia* as *nthuki nkabûta* (the 'exhausted generation'). Although droughts and famines occurred when members of the opposing Ntangi *gîtîba* were initiates, Meru observations that more famines occurred during the initiation times of Mbaine age-classes are essentially correct. I offer no explanation for this observation. Periods of war, however, effected the Ntangi more than the Mbaine, because both the First and Second World Wars recruited more men of warrior age from the Ntangi than the Mbaine in both 1914 and 1939. It was to this oscillation which led Peatrik (1999) to speak of these *gîtîba* as signifying shifts in environmental and social patterns:

Une mesure supplémentaire du temps apparaît ici où les cycles de cinq générations sont associés à des manifestations atmosphériques récurrentes et antagonistes: un cycle est associé avec le soleil et l'autre, avec la pluie. Le retour au pouvoir du premier cycle s'accompagne, croit-on, d'une épisode de sécheresse, au sens où les saisons sèches seront plus marquées que les saisons humides; à l'inverse, l'arrivée au pouvoir de l'autre cycle coïncidera avec des saisons humides prononcées. À ce balancement pluriannuel qui procède de l'observation empirique de la succession d'épisodes plutôt secs ou plutôt humides que la météorologie commence à comprendre, sont associées des idées de prospérité différentielle. Le *gîtîba* du soleil est favorable à la multiplication des troupeaux, des humains et des abeilles mais il est aussi synonyme de guerre, alors que le cycle de la pluie apporte des récoltes abondantes et signifie le retour de la paix (Peatrik 1999: 80-1).

Peatrik's idea of differential prosperities between adjacent age-classes was mirrored by a number of explanations I received in the field, but in practice this interpretation was far from equivocal. There were competing interpretations.

Others, immediately linking my questions about *gîtîba* with their background knowledge of my fieldwork exercises and interest in history, attempted to reach some kind of inter-subjective compromise by answering that *gîtîba* was perhaps best thought of as a 'century.' A cursory analysis would demonstrate that the names of the Nyambene age-classes repeat themselves every hundred years or so. Closer examination shows that there are four generations to a *gîtîba*, such that the names are

repeated on the coming of the fifth genealogical generation (*rûcîara rwathano*). Another possibility is that, like in the 'West', the memory of descent begins to fragment after several generations. In terms of a chronological limit, it is possible that the length of the *gîtîba* reflects some kind of limit upon social memory. Indeed, today's eldest men and women in Meru speak about their parents' *nthukî* but rarely mention those which preceeded their parent's generation. The idea that *gîtîba* is the Kîmerû equivalent of the 'century', however, possibly reflects a problem in the historical perspectives of differing respondents. A closely related idea is that this 'key word' simply means something different than it did in the past.

When I asked a teacher what he thought *gîtîba* meant, he told me to give him a few days to find out: he would ask his grandfather and a few other old men. He even wrote the word down on a piece of paper. Figuratively, I began to sense that I was chasing a phantom, perhaps a figment of my own 'ethnological' imagination. But still there was a nagging doubt about dismissing *gîtîba* outright. Afterall, hadn't Kailanyi linked *gîtîba* into that other preeminent Kîmerû 'key word' of *nthukî*? Why would one term fall away from the problems of social life, while the other seemed to invite consistent and, sometimes, passionate debate? What did the anachronism of *gîtîba* begin to suggest about Meru social life? Why did the term not have the power of explanation that it *must* have had before? Essentially, what had changed? I didn't ask these questions to carry out a historical semantics of Kîmerû, indeed, my limited grasp of the language would have nipped this in the bud. Instead, like Richard Waller (2000), I had come to accept that people who organise and talk about themselves through categories of age and generation - perhaps above class - come to create a political imaginary which is acutely responsive to historical change and continuity. In other words, I came to think that *gîtîba*, when thought about in the context of age-class

formation, was a rhetorical tool, or as Foucault would have it, a 'technology of speaking' which made the subaltern version of Meru history possible.

Here, I think the arguments made by Raymond Williams (1976) about 'key words' are apt and applicable to the historically shifting fields of meaning in Kîmerû concepts. Returning from the Second World War, Williams and another colleague who had been absent from Cambridge University for the duration of the war were curious to discover that many of the words they had been familiar with before the war had changed their meanings in the time they had been away. Adjusting to their new world, they conceded in conversation, 'the fact is, they just don't speak the same language' (Williams 1976: 9). Because concepts and the words used to express them are contested and, thus, change, the 'key words' which are most grounded in social life, materially and symbolically, are frequently the site of critical debate. This can be applied to the way in which Meru debate concepts which are connected to broader political idioms of age and generation. Across and between generations, these concepts are made and remade through shifting points of reference, usually biographical in scope. Insisting that variations in meaning embody different experiences and differing interpretations of experience, Williams argues:

It is an exploration of the vocabulary of a crucial area of social and cultural discussion, which has been inherited within precise historical and social conditions and which has to be made at once conscious and critical - subject to change as well as to continuity - if the millions of people in whom it is active are to see it as active: not as a *tradition* to be learned, nor a *consensus* to be accepted, nor a set of meanings which, because it is 'our language', has a natural authority; but as a shaping and a reshaping, in real circumstances and from profoundly different and important points of view: a vocabulary to use, to find our ways in, to change as we find it necessary to change it, as we go on making our own language and history (Williams 1976: 22)

The constant traffic in 'key words' occurs because they lack precise definitions, exactly the kind of slippery terms needed to keep up with the contingency of social

life. Likewise, the connections Meru make with age-class formation are polyvalent. But at the same time, it is through differentiated, sometimes contradictory, understandings of concepts like *nthukî* and *gîtîba* that Meru open up discussion about their social life.

While some sociological meanings of *gîtîba* have shifted, somehow, from the specific social relationships it addressed, this is not the case for *nthukî* which dominates and even excites the political discourse in Meru. Consider the ambivalence of the concept of *gîtîba* in comparison to the words for age-class or generation (*nthukî* or *rûcîara*). Once, when asking an elderly woman in Imenti about the ‘importance of *nthukî* these days’, through her grandson as an interpreter, she demanded we clarify what we meant. We were discussing an idiom, that of ‘leaking’ (*îcabûka*), which designated a ‘sloppy’, ‘uncaring’, or even ‘rebellious’ generation:

- “Which is this age-class said to be leaking?”
- “Which? All age-classes are leaky”
- “Why, then, are they said to be leaking?”
- “Because of their disturbing behaviour... isn’t your age-class behaving badly?”
- “So, we Mûng’atîa [a current Imenti *nthukî*] are behaving badly?”
- “You’re the worst leakers”
- “Are age-classes still important?”
- “What?!? How can they not be important?”
- “Even nowadays?”
- “Yes... they are important... they have importance”
- “Tell us how they are important”
- “Start by asking me which age-classes I have seen”

The problem with our usage of the term *nthukî* lay in its intended meanings. We were not using it in its strictly sociological sense of a relationship between parents and children, on the one hand, nor that between adjacent age-classes related to one another through senior and junior positions on the other. Instead, we were evoking the term *nthukî* “whether it was still important”, a usage which presupposed that the term was no longer a key word. Unlike the concept of *gîtîba*, which is clearly anachronistic in some usages, the concept of the *nthukî* maintains its place as a key word, albeit in

different schemes of meaning specific to today's historicity.

This section has aimed at showing how words like *gĩtĩba* become recycled into an ongoing rhetoric of historical knowledge. The wide field of meanings which the term inspires in conversation and debate is an outcome of the shifting semantics of everyday life as well as concrete historical change. In the next section of this chapter, however, it will be useful to look at the possible ideological arguments that are made through invocation of the terms, *gĩtĩba* and *nthukĩ*, as the parts of speech in localised historical knowledge. In other words, there remains the question of how such key words emplot historical narratives and charge them with meanings which reproduce ageist and generationalist hierarchies.

History and metahistory in central Kenyan communities

The question of indigenous theories of history among East African communities has not been taken as seriously as it ought to among historians and ethnographers. This is not to argue that it hasn't been written about, for there are now a number of loosely related articles which discuss the issue for some Kenyan and Tanzanian communities (cf. Ambler 1995, 1989; Kershaw 1997; Lonsdale 1992, 1995; Muriuki 1974; Shetler 2003). The problem here, however, is not necessarily that these interpretations and representations of East African theories of history are overwrought from scanty evidence, whether from the oral, archival, or ethnographic records, but that they tend to presume an unproblematic starting point over the more fundamental question 'What is history?' Indeed, there is another related problem at stake. In making the assumption that social and cultural *difference* in time and space bridges the distance between History (with a capital H) and histories, it is far too easy

(and ethnocentric) to reduce the histories of the subaltern *other* in terms of 'cyclic' or recursive concepts of time. This assumption is, of course, highly misguided in its simplicity and use of metaphors about time. The result is that the Kenyan theories of history are 'understood' through the culturally privileged idea that History, and its concepts of 'linear' and redemptive time, are the only legitimate version of historical consciousness. Such versions of History have already been deconstructed as metahistory by scholars such as Hayden White (1973), leading analysis of historical narrative towards a path which negotiates the uneasy fallacy of 'cyclical' versus 'linear' models of time and historical consciousness.

In his discussion of time and historical consciousness among the Ilparakuyo Maasai of northeastern Tanzania, Peter Rigby (1983) questions the abstract separation of concepts of time from the specific historical formations of the societies being studied by anthropologists. As a deft criticism of this tendency to subvert African notions of time to cosmological abstractions, such as the notion of cyclical time, Rigby argues:

There is seldom any attempt to place all these elements or levels of time reckoning, even where their existence is noted, in a total and *specific* historicity arising from the nature of the *specific* social formation under consideration, which in turn is itself a product of that *specific* historical development [emphasis mine] (Rigby 1983: 437)

Rigby's call for more specificity in ethnographic interpretations of time is simultaneously a refusal to essentialise 'Africa' as timeless and ahistorical. But, more importantly, Rigby suggests that there are competing and controversial concepts of history, leaving room for ethnographic comparison. The notion of *gîŋba* being interpreted here is vested with a 'total and specific historicity' which is analytically inseparable from the ecological, demographic, and sociological change experienced by

the last three Meru generations.

It is frequently stressed that there are historical connections among the so-called Thagicû Bantu, from whom a number of contemporary Kenyan peoples are believed to have been formed. These are the clusters of peoples living in Central and Eastern Provinces of Kenya who have been known for more than a hundred years as the Gikuyu, Embu, Kamba, Mbeere, and the Meru. Although it may be possible to assume, as C.W. Hobley did in 1910, that these peoples share many metaphysical understandings of the world and the cosmos, such as the decision making powers of God, spirits, and ancestors, few ethnographers have studied the weight of anthropocentrism in informants' explanations of the scheme of things. In other words, early European attempts to discern 'how natives think' overlooked the extent to which these people thought of good and bad events in the world and the cosmos as intrinsically related to human agency. An extension of this oversight were statements that such peoples lacked history.

Greet Kershaw's ethnographic writings about the central Gikuyu were the first to question this 'people without history' fallacy (Kershaw 1997). Her insights are pertinent to how different ideas of history can be from one social formation to the next. Kershaw's point of departure was the tumult of villagisation during the Mau Mau Emergency, when the central motif for historical narrative was the alienation of land from Kiambu Gikuyu and their struggle to regain it. She correctly asserted that it is the specificity of the historical and social context in which field research takes place that enables any history, at all, to be told. As such, in her dealings with the recall of elders about former struggles, the disastrous outcomes of social disorder and of things coming apart were silenced and reordered in an attempt to form memory around the good, the ordered, and the blessed. In Gikuyu thought, evil events stemmed from evil,

good events stemmed from good, in which God, spirits, ancestors, and living men and women all played critical decision making roles. Blessings from all of the above brought a man land, fertile wives, a long life, wealth and authority (Kershaw 1997: 15). Existential suffering in disease and misfortune, as well as raw inequalities, were punishments linked to transgressions made in the past. A man's virtue and fortune could be 'lost' in an instant, his cattle herds numerous one day, only to be taken the next. And all this, Kershaw tell us, was understood to have precedent in the way in which people spoke about the past, such that 'events which brought evil and their possible causes should be deleted from general memory' (Kershaw 1997: 16). As such, Kershaw argues that the Gikuyu sense for history, at least as it was formed in the early 1950s, stressed the human role between memory and 'good' and 'bad' histories, such that her informants would recall blessings from the past, but refuse to acknowledge that so-and-so had been cursed. History was, to the Gikuyu, selective because it was imbued with moral consequences for the present. Her Gikuyu informants would also withhold historical knowledge from younger people until they had reached the 'proper age' to be told, from whence they would possess the social gumption to put such knowledge to 'good' or 'evil' ends. She writes that the decisions not to expose 'evil' histories, such as the plight of families caught in the desperation of killer famines or diseases, was a moral response to the 'ancestors' in making such 'evil' come back into the existence of the living. In conclusion, Kershaw suggests that the telling of history is differentiated:

Given this perspective on history, it is not surprising that different people had different histories; it also explained the gap between elders and younger members in knowledge about land. As it was, though elders' knowledge about the distant past and its hardships had become limited and vague, younger males knew even less of the hardships of the past or the past itself. Each generation would lose part of its history (Kershaw 1997: 17)

The ideological stress on a differentiated history may have contributed to earlier European assumptions that the Africans they encountered lived in some kind of timeless, otherworldly twilight of past and present. Such a counter-ideology about the nature of history certainly legitimated the possession of African land since, as Kershaw aptly points out, a lack of history demonstrated the recent migration of the African peoples they colonized. After all, the adage might go, peoples without history are also peoples without a future. As many earlier ethnographers also sought to resolve this problem of perception with elaborate models of 'cyclic' versus 'linear' time, none sought out the ideological possibilities for ordering the relationships between the past and the present in ways which were at odds with these abstractions. Greet Kershaw's contribution to the problem of historical perspective is to underline the possibility that 'history', ignored by many European thinkers, might find its roots in the differentiations of social life, where recall or forgetting are often pragmatic claims against competing views of the past, present, or even, future.

It is my understanding that Meru feelings about history do not conform to that presented by Kershaw for the Gikuyu, but I do not have evidence to demonstrate whether this is a recent change, or else, the outcome of different rhetorical styles in the way and the reasons why histories are told. I suspect that any ideological brackets put around the telling of history are also subject to biographical and historical changes. I noted that several of my elder informants displayed an unease in discussing contentious issues of the past in the company of younger persons, usually myself and my minders. Others, however, as if driven by some purpose, would tell us, "I don't believe in secrets, so I will tell you what happened", before embarking on telling stories which, in the past, had been treated with great sensitivity. Consider the following fragment from an interview where we learned about the fear associated with

having a child before initiation and out of wedlock:

“How long was the courtship to last before marriage?”

“As long as they liked, but there was one thing that was greatly feared... you told me to tell you everything..?”

“Yes, tell me...”

“The girl feared getting a baby before marriage... young man feared if this girl gets a baby. We would all lose our reputations... who has no fear among them?”

Other elder women were less open about discussing this period of time, which I could not date accurately since the prohibition against uninitiated girls' pregnancies lasted many decades and still lingers on today in some quarters. Not only were the colonial officials punishing girls who became pregnant and abandoned their infants, or who sought abortions, but such young girls (*nkenye*) also had to keep such incidents strictly to themselves, lest they be seen to bring great shame and pollution (*mûgiro*) to their fathers' compounds. Others, ran away to other parts of Meru as refugees, often with their warrior lovers, but just as often alone. Because such experiences were traumatic, that is 'bad', they were considered unmentionables, more than what we in the West might term, a 'skeleton in the closet' or 'dirty linen.' Yet, undeniably, such incidents have, in the European understanding of history, a significant place in explaining the intertwined threads of biographical and historical time, as exemplified by Lynn Thomas' (1996; 1998; 2003) extensive historical research on this topic in Meru.

Despite the ambivalence which traffics through the concept of *gîîba* it is relatively clear that it cannot be disassociated from the history of the Meru as a people. The problem may be put simply. It is not a question of seeking an English translation of the term. An obvious example of this kind of translation work would be to suggest that *gîîba* be compared to our familiar concept of the 'century.' While the 'century' can be used outside of European historiography, the application of *gîîba* to

any situation outside of Meru history, and its rhetorics, would be nonsensical. A century is a unit of chronological time with its own history, to be sure, but it is privileged to be commensurate with other times. It forms the basis of European historicism, and it is through this unit that the histories of other peoples are compared with that of Europe. *Gîtîba*, however, cannot be thought of merely as a measurement of time, or a chronological marker, because it is an idiomatic and highly specific concept of historical time incommensurate with any other social formation other than the Meru.

To bring this chapter into perspective and closure, *gîtîba* marks the period of historical time during which the Meru have organised themselves into age-classes and social generations. According to Meru narratives about their originary exodus from Mboa, their subsequent wanderings in the wilderness, and their eventual peopling of the Nyambene Range and the eastern flanks of Mount Kenya, a revolutionary period occurred in their history which required the 'adoption' of age-class organisation to counter inherent trends towards social chaos and crises. The hero of this story, Kaura wa Bechau, is discussed in the following chapter, but it is to this obscure, even legendary figure that many Meru attribute the origins of their social organisation and its concomitant ideas about history. Since then, the question of where the Meru have come from and where they are going was continually raised and answered through the rhetorics of historical knowledge.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rivalries and Curses: the enigma of succession in historical perspective

‘Who is in power?’

The most general assumption about age-class and generational ‘systems’ is that they are political. Not surprisingly, one of the most basic questions an ethnographer can ask during fieldwork in such a context is ‘Who is in power?’ In the anthropological literature on the topic, the ‘who’ has always been older men of a specified age-class, where there is general agreement that they are the generation in power. This is the gerontocratic model of power frequently alluded to in the ethnographic literature (Aguilar 1998). But notions of gerontocratic power have their theoretical problems, not the least of which stems from the ethnographic authority to answer the question, in the first place, coupled by the additional problem that these same ethnographers have been, overwhelmingly, young European males.²⁹ Very likely, the problem is that there will not be any general consensus or agreement on this question among the people being studied; and that the basic question ‘who is in power’ is precisely what has yet to be settled. Very little in the way of ethnographic writing has looked at the problem of gerontocracy from other perspectives, the most notable being that of women (see Kawai 1998: 147-167). Other agents situated outside the formation of local age-classes, such as women, government administrators, merchants, and perhaps ethnographers, must also be included in this question about power. This is because

²⁹ There are, of course, exceptions among European women and African or Japanese men ethnographers of societies with generational ‘systems’ (cf. Legesse 1973; Kurimoto 1998; Peatrik 1999)

such agents often have the authority not so much to wield power, but to represent it. But, here, it must also be recognised that power is differentiated and the capacity to use it in such an organisational context is often beyond the scope of 'outsiders' knowledge. Most evidently, the power of a District Officer (DO), an employee of the Provincial Administration, resonates with local people in a completely different register than that, say, of an elder member of the 'Fathers of the Country.' Likewise, the ethnographer's portrait of 'gerontocracy' may be appropriated or rejected depending on its instrumental political value to local and state actors (cf. Mamdani 1996; Amselle 1990). And, importantly, neither the elders', nor the DO's, nor the anthropologist's power goes uncontested. Nevertheless, these problems of power - and perspectives on it - provide the focus for the present chapter.

In Meru, one of the main ways through which power comes to be critiqued and contested is the expectation of generational succession. By 'generational succession', I mean to argue that the formation of age-classes, effected through the initiation of youngsters, puts pressure on the very oldest in a chain of successive age-classes to withdraw from their rôle as decision makers. The main argument in this chapter is that the moment of succession is actually a temporal *trompe d'œil* which spans so many years that no panoramic perspective can prevail. The effect of this upon the politics of generational succession is that it succeeds in creating communities of argument, based on the imagined hierarchies of age, gender, and generation. Ethnographic interpretations of this problem of perspective reveal that events perceived to be 'new' and unprecedented, on further analysis, often turn out to be historically recurrent formula with quite deep cultural pasts. In creating a political imagination where 'age' and 'generation' are viewed as fluid, moving categories, are younger and older people perhaps continually seeking to divert the consequences of asymmetrical power

relations? By examining accounts drawn from fieldwork on Tigania and Imenti views about the 'inevitability' of generational succession, the following sections aim to resolve this question.

Some detail on the debates between elder and younger Meru about 'who is in power' within the context of Imenti age-classes might help shape the problem of historical perspective alluded to in this chapter. In addition, youth and middle-aged men's agitation for a long-overdue generational succession, which the Imenti *njuri nceke* have mentioned as a pressing 'priority', may be creating more confusion among the Imenti than it does among the Tigania and Igembe, for example. With the current disorganisation of the Imenti *nthukî* - which some of my younger informants called 'mixing' - the question of which specific age-classes of men have access to power remains a topic of current debate.

The lines which divide Imenti age-classes are blurred to some degree. Men and women who were young adults during the 'Mau Mau' Emergency presently control access to land and title deeds, cooperative marketing societies, credit facilities and bank accounts. It is for this reason that they generally consider themselves to be the most powerful of all Imenti age-classes. I am convinced, however, that their accumulation of material wealth does not exhaust the issue of how Meru elders maintain and exercise their power. In conversations with the young other dimensions were given importance. I sensed deeply felt, existential turmoil among numerous young men and women over the ambiguity of their status as mature social actors. Their problems were not reducible to questions about insufficient access to land or the legal security of a title deed. These economic ways of seeing seemed, to me, to miss out on equally important conundrums and ethical ambiguities which weighed heavily upon the expectations of the young. A title deed in the name of a young man who is no more than a 'boy' in the

opinion of his elders is about as useful as a vast tract of land which nobody is prepared to work. The power of the elders stems from a moral discourse about personhood and development which was centred around Meru ideas about maturity. "Young people these days are not strong enough" is a commonly heard observation by the old. Depending on the context, a man of forty years of age, with a wife and children, can be symbolically reduced in status by his elders calling him 'raw', 'unripe', hence, immature, as in the phrase, "*mûntû ûrîa mbithi*" ('that man is unripe'); that is to say, unprepared for his station in life. Age, in itself, carries little significance if the person does not possess the symbolic capital of mature personhood. An immature person, for example, must seek blessings from his or her elders before pursuing a personal undertaking. In each new development, say, building a house, preparing one's bridewealth, a young person must be seen publically to *kûromba njîra*, that is, to ask permission from one's elders. And, symbolically, elder men and women possess the power to bless or curse others as they see fit. Denying a younger person approval to do something is only a different shade of what Meru conceive of as a curse, the tacit refusal to offer blessings in the form of consent, encouragement, or support.

The question of a generational succession looms large in the consciousness of youth and middle-aged farmers who, collectively, still have no access to title deeds and the sureties of inheritance within the domestic group. Responsibility for some kind of token ceremony indicating the abdication from ownership and stewardship of small holdings, on the part of men and women elders now aged in their seventies' and eighties', is felt to rest upon the moral decisions made by these elderly actors. It is largely felt that their status as elders justifies the respect, deference, and dependance that younger persons are expected to show towards them. On the other hand,

however, younger people argue that these elders have also been unfairly withholding their control over the inheritance of property and other social rights, thereby excluding the younger generations from achieving the means of achieving full social maturity: a title deed and access to sufficient land and credit to make a living. This alone, however, does not explain why such elders are viewed as powerful. In conversation with two Imenti youths, I recorded them debate this question of who was in power:

“As in terms of *nthukî*, which are in power now? Like, it is Mbaya or perhaps Kîbaabu?”

“Like it’s the Mbaya now who are the people giving their children [properties]... they are kind of now trying to disperse their [power]... and even, let’s say, that we have Gîchunge and Kîbaabu there now... in between... they are the people in power in most things. They are the elders who are making the decisions. In fact, they are the people who have the knowledge now to [effect some kind of transfer of property and power] in so many fields. So, these Mbaya and Gîchunge are the people who can talk and be heard, because everywhere they are now in charge of these parastatals. They are the people who, like the Mbaya, are chairmen of very many bodies... then the Gîchunge are in control of some other things here, such as schools... they are the school principals, the area chiefs... they tend to fall under that group now. So, they are very influential, those two age-groups. I think those are the most powerful now...”

“Your father is Mbaya? Or is he Kîbaabu?”

“Kîbaabu”

“So, actually most of your fathers... most fathers of Mûng’atîa would be Kîbaabu?”

“I think Kîbaabu are supposed to be...”

“Your old man is Kîbaabu”

“Aah... those people like Nahashon and Samson haven’t really been given things... know that they are now coming into things and those Mbaya are aging a lot... know that it is now their children who are coming into things. Where are the Mûng’atîa at? Our own fathers haven’t really started to be given things... they haven’t really been called to any power on their own, but Kîbaabu on their part have begun to kind of struggle...those like Nahashon and Samson... they’ve begun to struggle because they want to be getting something now. Like, I’m saying that our fathers are those Kîbaabu... Kîbaabu or Gîchunge really? Like, Muriuki is a Gîchunge...”

“Muriuki... this chairman of Kenyan National Union of Teachers and those kinds of people are Gîchunge”

“He isn’t the same age as your father?”

“I guess so...”

“So, what we trying to say is that those people who are now giving away their properties, who are aging, those are Mbaya”

“Giving to Gîchunge..?”

“Yeah, but you see, even Kîbaabu and Gîchunge... and some of the Mbaya... they all have children who are falling under our age-group of Mûng’atîa, because this is a very big group. The Mbaya have elder sons who have been put in our big group of Mûng’atîa, so, to us, we have not started asking for things from our fathers that strictly. But the children of Mbaya are now asking for things because these people are aging fast. They are the people who are in control. So, where I was saying that maybe it’s Kîbaabu and Gîchunge who are actually so influential and not Mbaya. Mbaya is a bit older.”

In this short passage, it is revealed that these youth have difficulty identifying which Imenti age-classes have access to power. With respect to their relative position in the hierachies of age and generation, quite a number of Imenti youths cannot identify their father’s *nthukî*. Until they marry, a greater number have difficulty knowing their clan (*mwîriga*). One would expect, as many older informants stressed, that this confusion comes about because of the fragmentation of Meru social life experienced in recent decades. Such a point of view is consistent with most versions of modernisation theory and such theories have been internalised by many Meru themselves. Again, however, this is but one version on the problem of historical perspective.

Rivalries and curses: the spectre of succession in Tigania and Igembe

In late November, 2002, with only a month left before the General Elections which would usher in Kenya’s new NARC government, central Tigania was a hotbed

of political intrigue, rumour, and heated discussions. The clamour and activity witnessed during this month connected the struggle of aspiring MPs for seats in Nairobi's Parliament House to the ongoing local politics of age and generation. The electoral campaigns mirrored the locally organised and 'traditional' politics of age-class formation and generational rivalries in ways that were still not clear to me by the time I left the field in March 2003. Nonetheless, while the elections were over by January 2003, the political pressure exerted upon Tigania politicians, from both 'modern' and 'traditional' arenas, continued to be felt in the circumcision festivities of youths and at the by-invitation-only meetings of the *njuri nceke* and the *lamalla*. Most of the following accounts pertain to the period six months before the elections. If on one given night, I was to participate in a rally whose organisers sang circumcision songs to shame a particular aspiring MP; then on the next, I would find myself listening to the voices of *nthaka* as they sang no less ribald versions of the same, but for different reasons. In Meru, politics do not conform to neat boundaries which separate the local from the national, nor the personal and the public.

But it is the meetings of the *njuri nceke* which concern us here, although I was not in a position to participate directly in these 'selective' affairs. Over the months leading up to the new circumcision period, there had been a series of large meetings of elders at one of the special groves of trees below Rwerea hillock. There are some nineteen such sites within Tigania, the most significant being at Mikinduri, Kianjai and Mbaranga. Such meetings are known as *kîthiiri* and are opposed to the more specified juridicial meetings of the various *njuri* councils, or *bîama*, which aim to solve disputes. A *kîthiiri* is a matter of wider importance to the community, often bringing in elders from both Tigania and Igembe. According to local gossip in Mikinduri, some claimed the *kîthiiri* had been organised because of conflicts over land between 'fathers' and

‘sons’, while others hinted at the formal announcement of the latest youth to be named as a *nthukî*; the ‘sons’ of the Miriti, who were expected to be called Gîcunge (or Îcunge). Other more garrulous individuals spoke of the impending General Elections and the rôle of the *njuri nceke* in its outcome, whilst others even suggested that the meetings were about darker, occult happenings which contradicted the teachings of Jesus Christ. Since at least August, however, I had been made aware of an ongoing debate among the *njuri nceke* about the effects of an old curse upon the handing over of power between the age-classes of the ‘Fathers of the Country.’ In 2002, the ‘Fathers of the Country’ were represented by the Ratanya who were initiated from about 1946 to 1955, a period which roughly corresponded to the ‘Mau Mau’ insurgency.

On witnessing from afar the first of three *kîthiiri*, which scores of elders attended, rumour soon circulated that the Ratanya had proposed to carry out a ritual called *kûnekanira thiirû* (‘to hand over the way’). Through discussing this ritual with people who had never formerly witnessed it being performed, I interpreted it as a kind of ‘cleansing ceremony’ linked to plans for a generational succession. Speaking with a member of the Nyambene Mau Mau Veterans Association, who called himself Nguruwe, I learned that many Ratanya were convinced that the oaths administered during the Emergency by participants in Mau Mau had been ‘unclean’ because they had used human flesh, blood, or excrement. Another Ratanya from Giithû, M’Ncebere, stated that the oathing had brought about a curse, or a *kîruume*, because it had been ‘filthy’ (“*mma îrîa îrûîîre mîgiro*”, lit. ‘that oath brought pollution’). Whether these oaths were similar to those administered by the Kenya African Union (KAU) during the height of the struggle is unknown, but there is anecdotal evidence that insurgents had ignored many ‘spiritual’ prohibitions and abused elders, which may also be

viewed as grounds for the proclamation of a curse (Njagi 1993: 45-55). Very few Ratanya would speak to me about either oathing or the rumour of a curse, such matters being considered inappropriate for conversations with a younger person (let alone a white), especially outside of *kîthiiri* whose participants were sworn to silence. Here and there, however, trickles of rumour led to broader discussions about the underlying local conflicts instigating larger *kîthiiri* meetings throughout the year.



Plate 8: *Njuri Nceke* pose for a photograph, Muringene, Igembe (1998)

By September, during the long dry season of *thaano*, it was known that the chairman of the *njuri nceke*, M’Kailimbi, challenged the elders to take responsibility for the negative effects of former oaths upon the ‘sons’ of the Ratanya. Many recent social crises were imaginatively linked to the oathing of the 1950s. While a strict interpretation of Meru ideals about age-class formation and the dual organisation of generations into *gîtîba* would categorise the ‘sons’ of the Ratanya as the Miriti,

initiated from about 1973 to 1981, many Ratanya were said to have initiated their younger sons as Gwantai, from 1983 to 1991, even though this age-class are thought of as being the 'sons' of Lubeeta. The effects of the *kîruume* were said to have been inflicted upon the Miriti and the Gwantai. When asked for evidence of the curse's malignance, a few elders pointed out the perception that large numbers of these younger men were afflicted by 'bad' and immoral behaviour, antisocial traits, and diseases such as HIV/AIDS. Through claiming responsibility for the 'cleansing' of the *kîruume*, the Ratanya represented themselves as the *beethe-ba-nthû*, or 'Fathers of the Country', even though this status was disputed by the slightly younger Lubeeta, who were in formation during the decade 1959 to 1969.

This initiative alarmed some Lubeeta who viewed Ratanya's proclamation of a *kûnekanira thiirû* as a ploy to hand over the status of *beethe-ba-nthû* to their 'sons' of the Miriti. The matter conjured up conspiratorial distrust of the Ratanya by the Lubeeta, some of whom claimed that the move was consistent with an even older political incident which occurred between these *gîtîba*, Mbaine and Ntangî, sometime in the late 1930s, or even before. While I will describe how this earlier rivalry between these *gîtîba* was invoked in some detail further below, it is worth noting that quite a number of prominent Lubeeta have enjoyed political success as MPs or councillors, while very few Ratanya have ventured into parliamentary politics, despite having a vested interest in piloting the affairs of the *njuri nceke*.

This difference of alignment in political activities owes much to the earlier histories of these adjacent *nthukî*, especially when considering Ratanya's youthful participation in Mau Mau and Lubeeta's coming-of-age during the first optimistic years of independence. The formal education of the Ratanya, it is widely assumed, was disrupted by the events of the 1950s and their political ambitions radicalised

towards local affairs by an aversion to participation in the state. In contrast, the Lubeeta represent the first *nthukî* to have had almost universal access to schooling, literacy and technical training, with quite a number of them graduating from universities. A small and élite cohort of local Tigania businessmen and politicians known as the 'Big Five' are all Lubeeta, among whom are included such popular figures as Karaurî and Ndubai, both well known former politicians. For their part, quite a number of informants told me that these 'Big Five' had been subject to a separate curse, originating in Mûthaara some hundreds of years ago, which has given them political and financial success, but early and tragic deaths. Here is an abbreviated narrative about the curse upon the 'Big Five' as told to me in 2001 following the death of a Lubeeta army colonel hailing from Mûthaara:

In Mûthaara, long ago, there was a brave war leader (*laing'o*) by the name of Lûkûciûkû, who returned from a raid upon Baringo with many, many cattle. As was expected, Lûkûciûkû brought these animals to a place called Ngûthirû, at the central meeting place of Tigania, where representatives of each of the major sections claimed their share of the livestock. So successful was Lûkûciûkû as a war leader that his fame could not be rivalled. Other warriors grew intensely jealous and began to talk amongst themselves. One day, a group from Mûthaara and a group from Karama came across the mother of Lûkûciûkû. Having just been shaved, she asked if they could dignify her by applying oil to her skin, but she was badly abused. "Your son is a *laing'o*. Go and apply blood to your skin, for he has been killing people and has given away all his cows!", they cried out enviously. Mother of Lûkûciûkû was incensed by their behaviour and went to him with her complaint. Lûkûciûkû was angered by this insult and called together the *nthaka cîa mûciî* of his clan and its *njuri* elders to resolve the injury inflicted upon his name. Each of his kinsmen herded their animals together and redistributed them amongst themselves evenly, taking care to give mother of Lûkûciûkû many head of cattle. Lûkûciûkû then approached the councils of Mûthaara and Karama for reconciliation. They refused this gesture, before openly cursing the *laing'o* and mocking his status, saying "Is the war leader only one? We will organise our own councils from now on!" They intended to exclude Lûkûciûkû from participating in their councils. Some time later, the people of Lûkûciûkû's clan began dying, one after another, until they became known as the *mwito mûciî* (bringing death to the clan). The great war leader himself grew decrepit, but did not die immediately. He thought up a cunning and vengeful plan. Calling upon the Mûthaara and Karama, he offered to bless the young warrior of these areas before he could succumb to his ailments. He told the warriors to bring their walking sticks (*mîturo*) to his

homestead where he would bestow his blessings upon them by spitting benedictions. But, this was a trick, for Lûkûciûkû lay down on the pile of sticks, breaking them all in half. It was thus that the great war leader cursed the Mûthaara and Karama, "You will never have another *laing'o*. You shall break like sticks!" Since this time, long ago, the best leaders of the Mûthaara and Karama are broken by this curse.

Although allegorical, this kind of narrative was commonly voiced during the politically charged months before the 2003 General Elections. The death of the Lubeeta politician, Ndubai, was linked to this curse, which is called *kîruume gîa ncamba ciûkû* (the hero Ciûkû's curse) in Mikinduri. Another prominent political activist from Mûthaara, Ntai wa Nkuraru, although a Miriti, also died under mysterious circumstances while studying law in England. As it concerns the Lubeeta, the 'Big Five' are now only two and, in the discussions of local Tigania, their apparent disregard for, or aloofness from, the activities of the Ratanya dominated *kîthiiri* is circumstantial evidence for their "political confusion", as one Miriti put it, as well as their weak position within the general debates and intrigue on generational succession.

The main response to my inquiries about the large scale *kîthiiri* was that, with many of the aging Mîcûbû 'fathers' of Lubeeta still living, quite a number of the younger men throughout Tigania had not been given any formal inheritance from their fathers. This included Lubeeta as well as Miriti, men who are for the most part becoming grandfathers themselves, but also Gwantai who are, for the most part, now parents of young children. The political contenders in the 2002 election campaigns were one Lubeeta (Karaurî); two Miriti (Mpuru and Kîriankî); and a Gwantai (Gatirau Munya) who, surprisingly, won the elections. Their age-class membership appeared on their campaign posters quite conspicuously. While these politicians are wealthy men and presumably have not had to wait for their fathers' decisions to give them land, many poorer men of these *nthukî* expect some form of succession from their

Mîcûbû and Ratanya fathers in the coming years. There is also an additional pressure for some kind of succession coming from very young initiates, the 'sons' of the Miriti, who have not yet been formally named as the Gîcunge, many of them having already left school. While the younger age-classes are intent in accessing political resources from the state, perhaps to lobby for land redistribution or the reorganisation of the cooperative marketing societies, their elder counterparts mirror their participation in election campaigns by holding large gatherings under the name of *kîthiiri* and *njuri nceke*. In such a situation, the pressure to participate in any future generational succession is intense, a fact that the Ratanya seem to have tactfully exploited.

Ntwiko: generational succession, history, and memory

A few notes on the organisation of the generational succession among Meru age-classes may be added to this description of events in Tigania during 2002, before further analysis about their broader significance for the problem of historical perspective can be introduced. The Imenti Meru frequently speak of a process, usually prolonged over the course of several years, called *ntwiko*, which evocatively means a 'collapsing' or a 'land slide.' The last Imenti *ntwiko* was completed in 1952, although more must be said about this further into this chapter. The colonial administration periodically described the build up towards *ntwiko* as a period of tension, while other observers, such as the Methodist missionary, Mary Holding, described the *ntwiko* as a theatrical display of 'mock' hostilities (Holding 1942). An alternative way of viewing generational succession among the Meru is to stress the actual conflict, debate and contingencies that it engenders. As Peatrik (1999) noted in her ethnography on the Igembe-Tigania, age-classes are formed through the political

pressures applied by younger cohorts upon older ones to initiate and recognise them as a separate *nthukî*. In 1988, when she conducted her fieldwork, she noted the heightened sense of insecurity in Igembe during the formation of Gwantai, although armed and motorised 'gangs' of Miriti were thought to be more menacing to public safety than rowdy Gwantai initiates. I certainly subscribe to this interpretation, particularly with reference to the debates and arguments I witnessed in Tigania during 2002-2003. During the initiations of September, 2002, a group of some twenty *ntaanî*, or recent initiates, blocked a road into Mikinduri I was travelling on. Painted in white clay (*iira*) and armed with machetes and swords, the initiates cleared their throats menacingly (*kwara nkoro*) and refused to let us pass in our vehicle, until we had come to a full stop and had given them some loose change (*mûketha ya mûtaani*). Not all Tigania I subsequently spoke with thought the actions of these *ntaanî* were acceptable.

In fact, the Tigania do not mention *ntwiko*, but employ the term *gûtûrûka gaarû*, which has a double meaning of 'to destroy the warrior's barracks' and to 'approach the husband's house', glosses which accurately describe the movement of one age-class from their status as 'warriors' and their entry into married life at the point of succession. The *kîthiiri* meetings did not formally announce the *gûtûrûka gaarû* in the immediacy of my field work. It was, alternatively, a public gesture which possibly gave some context in which to discuss the problems associated with the expectations of a generational succession. This talk of 'handing over the way' exemplified the problem of historical perspective. The debate it excited over the proposal of a 'cleansing' was taken locally to be a long overdue, albeit highly contentious sign of a succession in the near future. At the time of fieldwork, however, it was in a kind of deadlock. A colonial administrator during the 1930s and 1940s,

Hugh Lambert, briefly mentioned that hints of an upcoming succession ceremony could be discerned by announcing a 'cleaning up of the country' before the actual *ntwiko* was to be achieved:

Proclamations are often made during the *ntuiko*. Formerly there was an attempt at "cleaning up" the country just before the replacement of one set or generation by the next; outstanding claims [...] were quickly settled... It is said that in Meru warnings were broadcast that unless such claims were brought for settlement before the *ntuiko* ceremonies, they would not be entertained. There was thus in theory a sort of limitation; a suit was barred by time if an *ntuiko* had intervened. But the limitation was largely disregarded and was possibly merely symptomatic of the usual feeling between *nthuki* (sets). However that may be, the country was theoretically "cleaned up", and in all the tribes the new rulers started their period of power with a clean bill of political health and usually set out to emphasize their power by proclamations, frequently no more than reiterations or slight amendments of earlier statutes (Lambert 1956: 137)

Rumours circulating after the largest of the *kîthiiri* held in late 2002, at which hundreds of elders attended, suggested that the *njuri nceke* had carried out a 'cleansing' rite in the form of a divination called *kûorîa kîruume*. This involved the sacrifice of a special ram (*nturume*). Although I was not permitted at any of these *kîthiiri* events, I was able to participate in several informal group discussions about the possible consequences of the divination. Because participating elders must not speak of *njuri* proceedings to the uninitiated - which mostly excludes youth and women as broad categories - information on this large meeting proved to be haphazard, speculative, and touched by the unsayable. Checking over my notes, I had expected the rite to be that of *kûorîa mburî*, a divination read through goat entrails which foretold of the most propitious time to open an additional *nthukî*, but some older men found this quite funny, pointing out to me that this had not been carried out since at least the time of Mîcûbû's initiations. Instead, they pointed out, the *kûorîa kîruume* was a sound alternative to any other kind of divination, especially since knowledge of many others had been forgotten and, they added, the morality of the Meru was at an all-time low. If it even

existed, one of them stressed, this divination may be just the trick to put them back on track. “Too many things go awry nowadays”, he mused, “for it to be completely useless.”

Several significant points must be made about these events. The *ntwiko* or *gûtûrûka gaarû* do figure, periodically, in the historical memory of individual, ageing Meru, but no one today has any clear idea about how to effect or bring closure to them. Perhaps this is illustrative of the creative tension which ‘tradition’ engenders in problems of historical experience and perspective. ‘Tradition’ in Meru has the meaning of something ‘lawful’ and this is why Meru often speak of *mwingo* (binding persons by law), rather than *mîtûûrîre* (manner of living together) when discussing their ‘traditions.’ In other words, *mwingo* is about creating closure from the heterodoxy and debate that defines living together (*mîtûûrîre*). The meetings of elders in Mikinduri was more about debating the historicity of past juridical precedents and binding this to the taken-for-granted way people presently live their lives, than it was about actually carrying out an uniform declaration of an upcoming, scheduled succession between the age-classes. Such a definitive proclamation was never issued. Regardless of the actual conflicts or competitions which are being played out between and amongst the generations, calling upon ‘tradition’ temporarily sublimates the stakes of political contest. The *njuri nceke*, in the form of meeting as *kîthiiri*, seize the responsibility for the community through symbolic actions such as ‘cleansing’, proclamations, and divinations, but these depend upon the additional political intrigues of rumour, debates and disagreements for there to be any effective impact on the political imagination of the community. It is in this latter sense that the meetings of elders become a focus for age-class rivalry and, hence, provides the contested framework for the construction of community through the argument such anatagonism

provokes. Yet, as mentioned before, since no single individual has a panoramic understanding of what is going on, the problem of historical perspective becomes one of the ways through which the elders appropriate the power to make decisions which will affect the community at large.

But what about earlier attempts to carry out a generational succession? Were previous *gûtûrûka gaarû* or *ntwiko* also beset by argument, intrigue and conflicts, albeit strung out over quite lengthy, subterranean periods of time? Or, are current uncertainties about 'handing over' power a recent problem? I will note, at the onset, that I was struck by the historical parallels between what I had experienced and witnessed during fieldwork - about the 'handing over of power' between senior age-classes - and what I read and cited from the colonial records at the National Archives in Nairobi.

Early in the year it was evident that the district was not in an altogether normal state. Disobedience to Tribal and Government authority was rife among the younger men and the old system of tribal administration through the "Agambi" or heads of sub-clans had completely ceased. Moran in defiance of their customs [were] indulging freely in drinking bouts instead of working and the elders and the headmen were doing nothing to stop this. Stock thieving from both the Meru themselves and settlers along the border was causing grave unrest. Old men were doing very little to assist their women to cultivate and the young men nothing at all. It was eventually found that the cause of much of this trouble could be traced to the fact that the "Ntuiko" or ceremony of taking over the country by new ages of elders and moran had started in 1927, continued through 1928 and was still going on in 1929 [KNA/DC/MRU/1/2: 1929 Annual Report]

Here, the problem of historical perspective is explicit. The colonial officer who wrote this report had to wait three years, possibly longer, before he was capable of reaching an understanding of 'what was going on.' But later on in the colonial period, the British colonial officers of the early 1940s were not insensitive to the creativity which could be applied to 'tradition' when critical political contests were being fought out between the age-classes and their *gîtîba*. Reporting on the *ntwiko* taking place among

the Imenti Meru of Mîiriga Mîerû in 1941, one official noted with some bemusement the degree to which ‘traditionally’ differentiated institutions, such as clan colours, could be appropriated for broadening the debate and contests which accompanied the periodic generational successions:

The Meru tribe is divided into the Red and White Clans and every clan belongs to one or other of these divisions. The distinction is of no great importance in the tribal organisation and is usually of no importance at all in administration. There are songs extolling the bravery of the warriors of one or the other colour, and occasionally a quip such as “That’s the sort of opinion one would expect from a man of your shade” is used with facetious intent. But the final ceremonies of the ntuiko in Mîiriga Mieru appear to have stirred up a stronger feeling and to have created something approaching a colour bar. It seems probable that the Murungi age-grade, going out of power, got the Kiruja to help them use the division as a political one in the hope that it would disrupt their rival Miriti (as each age-grade has members of both colours, of course) and substitute a political division based on clan for the one based on age-grade which was naturally not very popular with Murungi [*sic?*] for the time being. Thus, the argument appeared to be, if the substitution could take place Murungi, who had a membership of both colours, would stand a better chance of losing some of theirs. Any real attempt to graft political meaning on to the colour-division will have to be discouraged. The ntuiko clashes are bad enough and we certainly don’t want Wars of the Roses too. [KNA 1942: DC/MRU/1/2]

Although this officer’s understanding seems to be confused about the intrigue between the *gûîba* Ntîba (Mûrungî and Kîruja) and Kîruka (Miriti), the stakes of the *ntwiko* were such that the political imagination could be creatively expanded during the build-up towards the succession of senior age-classes and their replacement by younger ones.

Is it possible that competing Meru age-classes express their political intrigue through a kind of formula? Returning to the rivalry in Tigania between present-day Ratanya and Lubeeta, ‘tradition’ seems to have been altered to correspond to the subjectivities of postcolonial Kenya, but several narratives I collected suggested that these current rivalries were contingent upon previous ones. These elder and middle-aged men were, in 2002, engaged in a series of running quarrels which had, at one time,

embroiled their fathers and grandfathers in a similar standoff. At an earlier moment during fieldwork - I happened to be researching a period in the late 1940s when initiations in Mûthaara and Kianjai had been carried out in an unorthodox manner - I gleaned a number of narratives about the 'jealousy of Kiramunya', an age-class in formation from about 1905 to 1915. Known as the *ngoa ya Kiramunya*, in Kîmerû, this memory of 'jealousy' between two age-classes and their respective *gîtîba*, provided an exemplary form of historical knowledge through which the rivalry of Ratanya and Lubeeta could be understood. Here is an example of how the 'jealousy of Kiramunya' was relayed to me, although because such stories were partial and often incomplete, I had to rely upon several versions to reach a composite form:

The jealousy of Kiramunya started when they refused to give Ithaliî the bulls of the age-class feasts. Ithaliî were the sponsors of Kiramunya's sons, the Mîcûbû, when they were being initiated. These bulls were given to avoid bad feelings between these men. But, Kiramunya were really jealous of Ithaliî because of their standing and reputation, so they quarrelled with them, saying 'We won't give you anything and we, ourselves, will sponsor the initiations of our sons.' This mostly happened in Mûthaara and Kianjai. The Kiramunya did this to spite Ithaliî, but Ithaliî were not jealous when the time came to initiate the Ratanya. Mîcûbû were their sponsors. But since this time, the bulls of the age-class feasts have never been given. This stopped with Kiramunya's jealousy.

There are two major concepts for 'jealousy' in Kîmerû. The first, *rûriitho*, literally the 'envious eye', is used in a broad range of everyday contexts, but its meaning is usually limited to personal or domestic examples of jealousy. The second, *ngoa* or *ngoga*, connotes an intensification of jealousy, such that it is rarely used except outside of specific instances where large groups of people are moved to spite one another when competing. The *ngoa ya Kiramunya* was evoked during my fieldwork as an infamous example of a breakdown in the relations between adjacent age-classes over a period of time which spanned decades. It was likened to the relation between the Ratanya and Lubeeta, although as a formula and not as a direct historical

comparison.

As partially explained in a later chapter, the jealousy of Kiramunya led to the creation of interstitial categories of initiates who could not claim membership in either *nthukî* nor *mataana*. As it was initially explained to me, however, the incident started at the outbreak of World War One when thousands of Kiramunya were recruited into the ill-fated Carrier Corps as transporters. Their numbers diminished by death on the fronts of Tanganyika, as well as by the devastating famine of *kîaramûû* and the influenza epidemic of 1918-1919, Kiramunya felt threatened by the robust strength of the 'sons' of Gîcunge: their adjacent *nthukî* of the Ithaliî. In the versions which I collected, Kiramunya created enmity with Ithaliî because when the latter acted as the sponsors for the Mîcûbû *ndinguri* and *kobia*, during their respective initiations in 1933 and 1936, Kiramunya failed to present the food 'bulls' (*ndegwa cîa nthukî*) to the Ithaliî. The giving of these 'bulls' would have symbolised the Kiramunya's reconciliation of any rivalry with the Ithaliî when they had been younger, but this important ceremony was ignored. By withholding the feast bulls and eating them by themselves, however, Kiramunya sent a clear message of overt rivalry with their younger counterparts of the Ithaliî. Not long after this incident, however, the Second World War broke out and many of the Mîcûbû *ndinguri* and *kobia* were conscripted into the King's African Rifles (KAR) to serve in Italian Somalialand, Ethiopia, the Sudan and, latterly, the campaigns in Burma. Casualties in this war were also high, thereby reducing the population of the *gîtîba* Mbaine (those of Kiramunya and Mîcûbû), a process which some people stressed as increasing Kiramunya's jealousy. In some parts of Tigania, especially Mûthaara and Kianjai, the Kiramunya decided to sponsor their own 'sons' initiations, a decision which was historically unprecedented. This led to the creation of a new category of initiate, the *bûrukû*, who effectively

became outsiders from the institutions of the Meru polity.

While I shall explore the creation of the *bûrukû* with more detail in Chapter Five, further archival research suggested that Kiramunya's jealousy was also implicated in struggles for appointments in the colonial government's Tribal Administration as well. Read by colonial officers as a rivalry between the *gîtîba*, Mbaine and Ntangî (or Kîruka and Ntîba as it is known among the Imenti Meru), the concept of *ngo*a surfaced in documents related to the 1941 *ntwiko*, which saw the Imenti age-class of Murungi 'take over' from that Kiramana as the 'Fathers of the Country.' In Igembe, the rivalry between the Kiramunya and the Ithaliî had reached a kind of climax by this date, although it took colonial officials several years to interpret the reasoning behind their political intrigue. Colonial administrators noted the *fitina*, or quarrels, between the age-classes of the Kiramunya and the Ithaliî in the mid-1930s, just around the time when the Mîcûbû had not been fully formed and the first of the *bûrukû* were being initiated. Because the following passage is insightful to understanding the ethnographic present in Tigania, I have quoted it in its entirety from the annual report of 1941:

The "ntuiko" upset a number of Chiefs of the Murungi (Kiramunya) age-grade who were evidently afraid that the agitation by the Miriti (Itharie) grade would result in replacements of Government posts. There was even a degree of mistrust of the head interpreter (M'Muraa) by the Murungi, including Chief M'Angaine. The most troublesome effect of the ntuiko, however, occurred in Igembe and it was some time before its connection with the ntuiko was recognised. The trouble took the form of a concerted *fitina* against Chief M'Imathiu Ithiame of Maua, and developed into a passive resistance to all his attempts to carry on the administration of his location. Several months of careful investigation were necessary before the real trouble could be elucidated, the reason being that all the people concerned had sworn a secret oath to disclose none of the real facts. When the true story came to light it was found to affect the whole of Igembe and to date back to many years ago. Very early in the history of the British administration the Gwantai (Kaburia) age-grade decided to take concerted action to prevent any appointment, particularly of Chiefs, from among people of the Kiruka age-division, their own age-division being Ntiba. This, they thought, would be a very effective and, of course, new way of increasing the power of their age-division at the expense of

their rivals. If their decision had been followed in fact it would have meant that there could be no appointment from the Gichungi (Kirimana) or the Itharie (Miriti) age-grades. It seems that when appointments were actually made from Gichungi, the Kiramunya endeavoured by various means to put Gwantai's decision into effect and were successful by underhand means in getting some of the Gichungi appointments cancelled. But they were not successful in every case and some of the leading Kiramunya were badly treated. The appointment of Chief M'Imathiu in 1939 was contrary to Gwantai's decision and was consequently not much to the liking of Kiramunya, who were on the point of handing over to Itharie, the age-grade to which Chief M'Imathiu belonged. At the meeting to determine to whom the appointment should be given, the then District Commissioner made some enquiries as to the possibility of amalgamating the very small Maua location with one of its neighbours, this being in accordance with the general policy. But two of the Chiefs of neighbouring locations belonged to Kiramunya and the most influential Mugambi, who had previously suffered at the hands of Gichungi, of the third location was of Kiramunya too. These men, knowing that M'Imathiu was a man of great personality and influence, being a leading Mugambi of Itharie, feared that (as they put it, when they eventually "came clean") M'Imathiu and consequently Itharie would "swallow" the whole of Igembe, and this would be contrary to their own interests and to the decision of Gwantai to exclude the Kiruka age-division from Government appointments. They therefore got together secretly and thought out ways of stirring up feeling against M'Imathiu so that he might be deposed. It is probable that the Chiefs themselves kept aloof from any such *fitina* but they certainly took part in lighting the fuse which, they hoped, would eventually blow M'Imathiu and Itharie sky-high while they themselves sat back in safety. They dropped hints, in fact, to other leading Agambi of Kiramunya which suggested that the Ntiba age-division was in danger of being ousted altogether by Kiruka and that M'Imathiu was the ringleader in a concerted move to this end. The leading unofficial men of Kiramunya set to work very cleverly and stirred up feeling against M'Imathiu among the people of his own age-grade, using particularly very kind of reasonable or unreasonable disgruntlement that could be worked up into a complaint. In this they were helped by the presence in the Maua location of two pretenders to the Chiefship who based their claims on the fact that their families had provided Chiefs or Headmen in the past. The first effect of all this underground agitation was a deputation of men, mostly young, who called themselves the Njuri Ncheke of Maua and Antubochio - which they had no right to do - and demanded the dismissal of Chief M'Imathiu on the grounds, among others, of extortion and the use of witchcraft. They could substantiate none of the charges and returned to Igembe with the knowledge that Chief M'Imathiu would retain his appointment. This failure of the first attack did not satisfy the Kiramunya in the background and they accordingly continued to pull strings and managed to start a campaign of passive resistance. The leading Agambi of the whole of Igembe were then called in and invited to settle the trouble. But when, after a sufficient period, it became clear that they themselves were involved and that they had probably sworn a secret oath of silence and non-cooperation. They were then called in again and made to understand that unless they were prepared for the exclusion of Agambi and the indigenous bodies from all part in the administration of Igembe they must

get the oath “unsworn” and must then tell the true story of the origin of the trouble. They went back to Igembe feeling rather ashamed of themselves and asked that M’Murithi, President of the Imenti Tribunal, and Interpreter M’Muraa should accompany them and be present at the “unswearing” as representatives of the District Commissioner. This was done and at the “unswearing” the true story as given above came out. It was also agreed that the charges levelled against Chief M’Imathiu were entirely without foundation and that he had done nothing that a good Chief should not do. Chief M’Imathiu’s attitude throughout was entirely correct and in his share in the oath of reconciliation following the “unswearing” of the secret oath he made it clear that though he sought no aggrandisement either for himself or his age-grade if he were required by Government to assume the administration of a larger location (“even if it be from Mbirigata to the Thuchi”) he would not hesitate to take it and would administer it to the best of his ability [KNA 1941: DC/MRU/1/2]

This document reveals the degree to which Meru age-classes formed a community of argument. There is a clear difference of perspective between this lengthy archive and the brief version recollected during fieldwork. The political competition between Ithaliĩ and Kiramunya for government posts in the late 1930s and early 1940s generally has not been remembered in the stories of Kiramunya’s jealousy. It should be noted, however, that the political competition witnessed during the 2002 electoral campaigns does resonate with these earlier precedents, especially with regards to how age-classes become embroiled in the makings of political culture in Meru. The rather hidden aspects of this political culture - including oaths, secret palavers, invocations of age-class solidarity, and the threat of cursing one’s political opponents - are convincingly recurrent formula that suggest more than a fortuitous historical parallel. It is possible to argue that the very uncertainties which age-class rivalry provokes, especially critical during periods when succession is highlighted, emphasises the need to have a common political language through which the formation of age-classes and the succession between generations may be negotiated and argued about. The problem of age-classes, in Meru at least, is also a problem of historical perspective and political interpretation. Belonging to an age-class and, hence, being a member of the political community is not

so much seen here as a sociological or structural continuity, so much as it represents a continuity in the language and practices of argument through which the community is symbolically constructed.

In the next case study, this idea is explored further with respect to the situation in Imenti during my fieldwork there in 2001-2002. This relates almost exclusively to attempts to reform the Imenti *njuri nceke*. Again, the idea is to pay attention to the problem of historical perspective, witnessed in a comparison of archival to ethnographic materials, such that a pattern in the use of political language may be discerned. I shall narrow the focus to events taking place in the wake of the Mau Mau 'Emergency' in 1955 and relate this, comparatively, to the efforts made in 2001 to recruit hundreds of Imenti 'elders' into a renovated *njuri nceke* which, like its predecessor, has been the subject of local controversy and disagreement between the Imenti, on the one hand, and the Tigania and Igembe on the other.

Renovating the *njuri nceke* in Imenti

At a political rally held in March 2001 at the Kinoru Stadium, Meru Town, hundreds of spectators gathered to listen to speeches by opposition party politicians who had come from Nairobi. By the time I arrived, the stadium was full and I eventually ended up sitting far from the events under a tarpaulin with some charcoal vendors, straining to hear the addresses blaring out of a distorted PA system. It wasn't the best fieldwork situation. At that time I was residing in Mîiriga Mîerû, within walking distance of Meru Town, and I had been attending as many public gatherings as possible. Most of these were political in outcome, even if this was not the original intention. At Kinoru, on this occasion, each of the delegates praised Meru's

association with the opposition of the 1990s, while several made reference to the defunct Gikuyu, Embu and Meru Association (GEMA). GEMA was a 'tribal' political organisation that many Meru supported when Jackson Harvester Angaine (1898 - 1999), a renowned Meru MP, had joined up with the 'Change the Constitution' movement of 1976. Labelled as an 'ethnic business venture' by some of its critics, GEMA underwent something of a revival through the opposition politics of the 1990s. Just before the March 2001 rally, I had spoken with individuals who felt that Meru's long association with the political opposition was inevitably a 'tribalist' strategy that, they argued, partially stemmed from their own lack of nationalist-looking politicians and political organisations. Most of the people I spoke to, however, felt great resentment that Meru was, in their opinion, neglected since the late 1970s by Daniel arap Moi's KANU government, because of the 'tribal' shifts which had attended the 'Kenyatta succession' in 1978. In this argument, the GEMA bloc had been sidelined in political appointments and development funds, while other ethnicities aligning themselves with the Kalenjin - Moi is a Tugen - had benefited from the ethnoregional biases of the government (see Haugerud 1993: 38-43). Although this is an unavoidable perception about the 'tribalist' character of Kenyan politics, it is not clear whether to locate it in the rhetoric of disappointment with governance, or the rhetoric of trust in ethnicity. At the Kinoru Stadium, I was reminded of these different perceptions about 'tribalism' in Kenyan politics, because of a particular moment in the speech of a local councillor who was introducing one of the invited speakers travelling from Nairobi.

Making the point that a group of people must know who they are before they can act in a politically conscious way, this councillor argued that the Meru were 'for change' and that their identification with the political opposition over many years

demonstrated this trait. The councillor, whose name I will not mention, invoked the legendary figure of Kaura wa Bechau, a cultural hero of the Meru who in the distant, allegorical past was said to have founded the first *njuri nceke*. By speaking of Kaura wa Bechau, this particular man stressed that the Meru “not lose their way” politically and unify themselves with the opposition. The politician broke out into a well-known song:

Oo-ociû! Kaura-o-Bechau...
Kaura-o-Bechau narûmanîre njuri ikaura!
 Oh-hear! Kaura-o-Bechau...
 Kaura-o-Bechau left a curse that Njuri should never die!³⁰

In most narratives, Kaura wa Bechau is represented as a moral reformer among the Meru, who instituted many of the practices and organisations that define Meru social life. In some versions of the story, he instituted circumcision and clitoridectomy, while in others, he even borrowed the age and generational organisation from the Maasai, with whom the Meru were enemies.³¹ Kaura wa Bechau was seen as a hero because his *njuri* was a means through which social chaos and indiscipline could be controlled and balanced. Other narratives share this theme of the threat of immorality and disorder.³² The story of how Kaura wa Bechau came to insist that the (proto) Meru organise themselves into councils based on age and gender divisions is known by many persons. The song quoted above is, at least, as common as any nursery rhyme in English would be to myself. It is said that on his death-bed, the great moralist Kaura wa Bechau declared an oath that, as long as the *njuri* continue to flourish and rule, the Meru would remain one and prosper. If the Meru let the *njuri* diminish or be overtaken, then his death wish was that the Meru, as a whole, would cease to be a

³⁰ See David Maitai Rimiti's (1988) *The Njuri Nceke of Meru* for the words to this song 'Kaura Bechau.'

³¹ The Maasai and the Samburu were known in earlier times by the Meru as the *Uru*.

³² Here, I am chiefly referring to the stories of the 'Turkana', young men and women who fled circumcision; as well as allegories about the 'coming of a last generation' which will be reviewed in Chapter Eight.

community. He is reputed to have said, '*Kîruume gîakwa nî atî njuri îkoraura*' or 'My death wish is that *njuri* should never be allowed to die' (Rimita 1988: 79). This oath is called the *kîruume gîa Kaura-o-Bechau* (Kaura wa Bechau's curse). Keeping in mind the limits of my own historical perspective, this curse is presumably only mentioned when public morality and the future of the community are being debated. This describes the discursive context of my Meru fieldwork in both 1998 and the period 2001-2003. Although I heard this curse openly invoked in public, it was also mentioned in my discussions with local elders about rumours of an impending effort to recruit younger men into the Imenti *njuri nceke*.

This hearsay was intriguing because, as far as I was able to discern, the Imenti *njuri nceke* had not recruited any new members into its ranks since the 1980s and it had not taken in a large cohort since the 1960s. Calling for new initiations into the *njuri nceke* were its ageing members, some of them Kîruja, who 'took over' responsibilities as elders in the 1952 *ntwiko*, and who, today are ageing into their nineties'. Meru Central's 'Paramount Chief', a colonial honorific of sorts maintained by the present Kenyan government, Naaman M'Mwirichia, was the primary moving force behind the call to initiate younger members of the *njuri nceke*. One member of the *njuri nceke*, Baikiao, who has a vibrant interest in Meru cultural history and wrote a theology PhD thesis in 1977³³, led part of the initiative to expand the council's membership through the already existing Meru Leaders Forum. This is an organisation of politically active local men with close links to the Methodist Synod and, particularly, the Kenya Methodist University, which is based at Kaaga, Meru Central. Although Baikiao was a Catholic priest, he has since maintained his own Independent

³³ Ndegwa Ng'unyura, B.J. (1977) *Towards Africanisation of Christianity. An approach to the evangelisation of the Meru of Kenya in light of their tribal anthropology and post-Vatican council II Magisterium*, doctoral thesis, Turin, Rome, Faculty of Theology.

Church, which must be described as neo-traditional and syncretic. Catching up with him one day, I asked what the circumstances behind the new 'recruitment drive' were and why the *njuri nceke* were looking to younger men. Although the encounter was brief, I will paraphrase what he said below, since he is known locally to have acquired the title, *mûgwe*³⁴, which in his own words claims to be the "spiritual leader of all the Meru."

"There are a number of reasons why we are initiating younger elders into *njuri nceke*. Chiefly, it was decided that many things have gone wrong with the Meru for some time now because the *njuri nceke* was not kept as active in the life of the tribe as it should have been. The word of the elders on morality is considered final. But, many of the *njuri* elders are now ageing, so it is time for the younger generation to learn about its ways. Not only are we initiating more *njuri nceke*, but the *ntwiko* is a priority. We have four unnamed age-sets of youngsters to sort out. The *ntwiko* is a kind of cutting, cutting off one generation in power, so it can be given to the next. These days, of course, we have Christian rites and so we look to the good Christians for leadership in these matters."

Baikiao's emphasis on the succession issues was echoed by another elder, Francis Kiruja, who, although not a *njuri nceke* member, had been a local councillor of long standing. Kiruja told me, "Ah, this recruitment into *njuri nceke* has not occurred for a very long time now, maybe even since the 1960s, so these old men are worried that it will end. They need a succession, so that new can proceed the old." Mutuma Angaine, one of the new initiates into the 'new style' *njuri* is a prominent Gîcunge and a formerly highly positioned civil servant with whom I lived with for more than a year while in Imenti. In discussing how the *njuri nceke* approached him and asked if he was interested in becoming an elder (but not telling me anything about the initiatory process, which is secretive), he called upon the story of Kaura wa Bechau.

"Long ago, there lived an elder called Kaura wa Bechau, whom many Meru believe started the *njuri nceke*. These elders had the final word over the

³⁴ see Bernardi, Bernardo (1959) *The Mugwe, A Failing Prophet: A study of a religious and public dignitary of the Meru of Kenya* for a broad discussion of the office of the *mûgwe* and the *mûkîama*. Note that several Meru have since disagreed with Bernardi's earlier claim that the *mûgwe* was a 'failing' prophet and the author more recently republished the book under the title, *The Mugwe, A Blessing Prophet*.

Meru people, but also had the responsibility to make sure that the Meru remained moral people. Now, people are looking at our society nowadays, with all its problems, and thinking about what Kaura wa Bechau had predicted. And he said that "*Njuri* must never end, but if it does, then so to do the Meru." If you look around at how people are behaving, as many people do, you'd also see that this crisis is self-imposed. Well, that's at least how some people think of it. Naturally, I am happy to be initiated into *njuri nceke*, but I can't tell you what actually will pass on the day it happens."

Not only was this successful former bureaucrat initiated into the *njuri nceke*, but hundreds of similarly self-consciously 'modern' businessmen, educators, professionals and politicians were initiated into the *njuri nceke* during November of 2001. Even the national newspapers reported on this locally auspicious occasion, as witnessed in the *East African Standard*:

Meru lawyers and doctors were among 300 elders who were inducted into the new-look Njuri Ncheke council of elders. Others who were admitted to the council were teachers, clergymen, councillors and business people. The powerful council is the custodian of the Ameru customary laws and practices and has been in existence since the 18th Century. Its word is final. The fresh graduates were drawn from the four Meru districts of North, South, Central and Tharaka. The colourful ceremony held at the Meru County Council hall was presided over by the council chairman, paramount chief Naaman M'Mwirichia, aged 90. The elders are mandated to solve boundary disputes and draw new ones in the larger Meru region. (*East African Standard*, November 28, 2001)

The allusion to the 'fresh graduates' in this report points to an association with schooling and education as one of the new criteria of membership in this selective juridical council. And, importantly, not all elder men enter the *njuri nceke*, this term meaning the 'select' council, or more literally, the 'thin' council (-*ceke*, thin). Men whose reputations are sullied by drunkenness, irascibility, or adultery are barred from becoming candidates. Even poverty is considered a disqualifying characteristic. A Kĩbaabu I knew quite well confided in me, "Men like me cannot enter *kĩama*", by which he meant *njuri*, "because they call us *nkurumbu*." While I could not directly translate *nkurumbu*, semantically it is the same as the Tigania term *ntũrũka*, which comes to mean a wastrel or ne'er-do-well. This individual used to spend much of his



Plate 9: Tigania elder with markings of *njuri kîamotha* (1949)³⁵

³⁵ Photograph taken by Joy Adamson under contract by the colonial government (1967)

time in drinking dens, earning a reputation his wife, by her own actions, managed to redeem. Nonetheless, he thought that the decision to recruit a new membership into the *njuri nceke* was an amelioration to the immorality widely perceived to be subverting the 'good life' sought by many Meru.

Despite its aspiration to carry out moral reform, however, this 'new style' *njuri nceke* - as it is being called - is not without its critics. A young man thought the move to recruit "Meru's movers and shakers" into the council was an overt and cynical ploy to promote the richest of Meru Central's 'tycoons.' Echoes of this view could be heard among other actors. Another youth laughed at me during a conversation where I mentioned the *njuri nceke* initiations, adding, "Yeah! And the entrance fee is a Pajero!", a clear reference to the preferred vehicle among many wealthy East Africans in the mid-1990s, but also an attack at the increasingly prohibitive initiation fees charged by the *njuri nceke*. Among some of the rural youth I knew well enough, there were complaints that the same élites who had run the cooperative marketing societies, the banks, and the schools "into the ground" would now seek political 'immunity' in the 'kangaroo courts', as some of the local tribunals were derogatively called. With the presence of a provincial administration, government chiefs and 'headmen', and a police force to regulate and enforce the law of the Republic, quite a number of young people felt that the renovation of the *njuri nceke* was a repressive movement and a step 'backwards' in winning democratic and human rights. Nowhere were these sentiments more pronounced than in the local debates about the *njuri nceke*'s attempt to regulate circumcision.

Enforcing tradition: the *njuri nceke*'s efforts to regulate circumcision

I did not elicit so many responses to the renovation of the *njuri nceke* from Imenti women. This is not because these women are politically inactive - indeed I was lucky enough to learn a lot about Meru politics from elder women who had lived under colonialism - but, probably, because they are excluded from entering the *njuri nceke*. Their participation in other voluntary associations, such as self-help groups, or employment in nationally organised NGOs, such as FPAK (Family Planning Association of Kenya), has mirrored the renovation of neo-traditional bodies representing men, especially since the *njuri nceke* has made public their commitment of working in tandem with these other organisations. As Holding (1942), Peatrik (1999), and Thomas (2003) have demonstrated elsewhere, women have been historically marginalised from 'traditional' political arenas because their own separate, but quite powerful councils of elders were undermined by the colonial policies of Indirect Rule. Yet, one of the most contested interventions made by the *njuri nceke* has to do with the controversial 'cultural rulings' about the circumcisions of boys, on the one hand, and the banning of clitoridectomies on girls, on the other. Controversies over clitoridectomy and womens' initiations in general have long been themes of Kenyan historiography (Ambler 1988; Murray 1976; Thomas 1998, 2003) and elements of how they have been implicated in religious affiliations, education, and public conceptions of morality are dealt with in other chapters of this thesis.³⁶ Nonetheless, the point should be made that women's involvement in organisations like FPAK to curb what has become known as FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) has a parallel with the decision by male elders to renovate the *njuri nceke* and begin appointing and initiating younger men into its ranks.

³⁶ See Chapters Seven and Eight specifically, which deal with the coinage FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) as well as local perceptions about sexual immorality and the place of initiation in ordering youth.

An article published in the *East African Standard*, in October 2001, briefly narrates the most recent recycling of public controversy over the political issue of girls' initiations. The article was accompanied by a picture of an elderly woman 'circumcisor' from Tharaka brandishing two scalpels, bearing the caption, 'Dying Generation: Some Circumcisors Are Giving Up.' The rhetorical linkage between 'modern' NGOs, like FPAK, and the 'traditional' councils of elders, like that of the *njuri nceke*, is accomplished by the title, 'Courting Meru Elders' Support.'

The Meru community has made significant progress in eradicating traditional practices that harm girls such as female genital mutilation and early marriage. The female circumcision prevalence rate declined by 15 per cent between 1994 and 2000 in Nyambene District. The success is attributed to the support by the Njuri Nceke, the Meru Council of Elders. They are participating in the anti-FGM project. One of the projects is the Options Project initiated by the Family Planning Association of Kenya. It is supported by International Planned Parenthood and Plan International. The Njuri Nceke support for the anti-FGM initiative has taken many forms over the years. First, it banned FGM in 1957 in Meru. This was due to pressure by the colonial government and the influence of Christianity. This initial action by Njuri Nceke had effect on present day Meru and Tharaka-Nithi districts. Unfortunately, the ban did not affect semi-arid Nyambene. This is puzzling because the Njuri Nceke headquarters is located in Nchiru, Nyambene. However, due to the influence of the FPAK's Options Project, the Njuri Nceke once again banned FGM in Nyambene, last year. The Njuri Nceke have also shown their support for the anti-FGM campaign by attending anti-female cut rallies. Mzee Yohanna, 80, a member of the Njuri Nceke, took oath to support a ban on female circumcision. The strategy to use the Njuri Nceke succeeded because of the council's influence. It is the top decision making organ of the Ameru. The Njuri Nceke has legislative and judicial powers on culture. The council makes laws, settles disputes and enforces its directives - by force if necessary. Gaining the confidence of the Njuri Nceke to support the campaign was not easy. "Initially, the response was poor because we were asking them to go against their calling," says Paul Mbirithi, the chairman of FPAK's project advisory committee. The Njuri Nceke is the custodian of Meru culture and way of life. "FGM, which we were asking them to stop, is part and parcel of the Ameru culture. It was like telling them to reject what they were sworn to protect. For instance, they put laws demanding that the Ameru be circumcised. This was meant to ensure equality." (*East African Standard*, October 17, 2001)

The initiation of girls and the regulation of their sexuality have been recurrent themes of communal argument and contestation at varying points in the 1920s, 1930s, 1950s, and, more recently, in the 1990s. Lynn Thomas' (2003) insightful book, *The Politics of*

the Womb, discusses girls' initiation, abortion, childbirth and premarital sexuality in terms of the gender of Meru subalternity within colonial and postcolonial power relations. Focusing on the complex negotiations between local men and women about the transformation of their initiatory and sexual practices and, hence, their power, this book is an important historiography of Meru, but it tends to ignore the problem of historical perspective which local controversy inevitably provokes. In order to highlight this problem in respect to the recent renovation of the *njuri nceke*'s ban on female clitoridectomy in the 1990s, and compare the ethnographic present to the original declaration of a ban by the *njuri* in 1956, it is worthwhile to explore the current concerns and debates about boys' circumcisions.

As early as 1998, I was aware of a major controversy in Meru regarding the 'proper' way to initiate boys. Today's Imenti youth concede that they are circumcised in the 'Swahili' style. This means that they attend clinics and are often circumcised under local anaesthetic. Two such youth, from Kaithe, visited me in Mikinduri, Tigania, during the November 2002 initiations in the Nyambenes. They claimed that they could not attend the circumcisions of local boys, because they were, in their own words, "*tûragûtaanîrwa cîbîûîrîne na kîroge*", that is to say, 'we were cut with a scalpel in a clinic.' The term, *kîroge* (a scalpel), is considered an insult. For the most part, Tigania youth still idealise the masculine bravery and camaraderie of public, group initiations. In parts of Imenti, however, youths from poorer families have recently drawn criticism from several quarters, including schools, clinics, and churches, for 'reverting' to group circumcisions.

This has gone against an Imenti *njuri nceke* provisal that boys visit clinics for their circumcisions. The decision to change the 'traditional' circumcision of boys, like that of girls' clitoridectomies, follows the advice from workers in the public health

sector. Although the practice of having sons initiated in clinics goes back to, at least, the late 1950s, when several Christian families found the 'traditional' rites in contradiction with the gospel, its recent association with the spread of diseases like hepatitis-c and the threat of HIV infection has prompted the *njuri nceke* to compel parents to have the operations done by 'trained professionals.' The move by the 'new style' *njuri nceke* was bold, but it was seen to be addressing the problem of indiscipline and immorality which was being exhibited by some Imenti youth. In 2001, a Catholic priest wrote a scathing article in a local newspaper, *Mwembe*, about having to intervene in a 'forced circumcision' of two elder men in Ruiiri, who had somehow not been circumcised when they were youth. Another editorial letter, again written to the *East African Standard* in January 2002, asked the controversial question, 'What Is This Farce About Circumcision in Meru?'

Real weird tales have been bubbling out of Meru Central District in the recent past. They are the unrelenting stories of a diabolical cartel of self-appointed gangs of youths purporting to defend a backward culture. These battalion of retrogrades are preaching to the locals how they should circumcise their children in accordance with the Ameru tradition. According to them, a real man should face the knife - not the scalpel - the traditional way. Going to hospital for circumcision for them is misplaced. To some Ameru youth, manhood is not merely a matter of losing a piece of one's skin but losing it in the right way and in the right place. The real men who have faced real traditional knives are avowed enemies of the lesser men who go to hospital for the cut. In their wisdom, or lack of it, they regard boys who go to hospital as cowardly young men not worth the blood they shed. Perhaps no-one would have had problems with that had not these barbarians not gone a step ahead and vowed to re-circumcise those who went to hospital to make them real men. Only last week, about 300 youths ran amok at Uroko village burning down a house and generally wrecking havok and prompting police to intervene. Eleven youths were arrested but were later released after the owner of the burnt house pardoned them. As you read this a man is fighting for his life after he was mutilated by a bunch of crazed youths for trespassing where only 'real men' are allowed to tread. The Ntuuru village youths accused the man, who was circumcised in hospital, of trespassing into a traditionally initiated boys' seclusion. Indeed, this list of atrocities by these wayward youths is long. And though enforcers of law and order have variously acted to tame these retrogrades, it is apparent that they haven't done much to teach these brutes a lesson in the laws of the land. They should be taught to respect human rights. They should be made to know that there is law in

this country, they should not do things their misguided way. They should not be left to terrorise innocent people. There is no better way of doing this than arresting them and arraigning them before court. They way they will serve as a lesson to other egotistic youth, [Mr. Philemon Abong'o] (*East African Standard*, January 18, 2002)

While this editorial is strongly worded, refusing 'cultural' excuses for the violation of individuals under Kenyan law, it may stand as an example of the media's stereotypic representation of the Meru as violent, lawless, and backwards. I did not witness any 'forced circumcisions' in Imenti, although I was confronted by several in Tigania (described in Chapter Two). None of the 'forced circumcisions' I witnessed corresponded with the above descriptions. Nonetheless, I was aware that these were occurring in Imenti, especially in the higher areas of Abothûgûcî, such as Katheri. In confronting local youths in Mîiriga Mîerû about these events, most of them argued that violent circumcisions were motivated less by abstract or atavistic notions of 'tradition' and more by the opportunity to extort money from the community as 'circumcision fees' (*mûketha ya mûtaanî*). These informants pointed out that even if Imenti youths had wanted to perform a 'Kîmerû' circumcision, they probably would not have known how it was supposed to be organised, so few of them having gone through it themselves. They pointed out the making of 'easy' money and the eating of 'party' food as the most likely motive behind the attacks.

The underlying opportunism of such events had occurred to me before in 1998. Since not all parents can afford to have their sons initiated by a 'trained professional', I witnessed a new, younger class of circumcisors, or *ataanî* (sing. *mûtaanî*), reinvent themselves as 'nurses' without any training in public health whatsoever. Charging a reduced 'fee', such circumcisors have exploited a new market of opportunism, without regard to the dangerous practices they employ, such as reusing scalpels on multiple initiates and failing to provide instructions to the initiates' sponsors about medical

follow-up should events turn sour. In 1998, I witnessed such a case, when some initiates, infected by an unhygienic scalpel, grew progressively ill during their seclusion. With the care of a scrupled sponsor, I saw these *ntaanî* slowly overcome their infections and return to relative health before their 'coming out' ceremony.

What these concerns with circumcision and clitoridectomy point to, however, is that the *njuri nceke*, far from being a conservative force in Imenti, are experimenting with their mandate as the custodians of the 'traditional.' But this begs a question about the younger participants of the 'new style' *njuri nceke* of the Imenti. Through seeking inclusion into this 'traditional' arena of politics, what possible courses of action do the most recent members of the 'Council of Elders' aim to open up?

Most of the recent initiates own businesses, sit in local municipal councils, run public or private organisations, retain strong church memberships, and make efforts to accumulate power and wealth through a variety of enterprises. Although some of them retain kin ties with the 'chiefly lineages' of colonial times, quite a number of them are *nouveaux riches*, 'self-made' political entrepreneurs who have made connections at the national (or international) level, accessing different networks of power in government, the IFIs and banks, the churches, the judiciary, the universities, or the media. These are men who have overcome the new inequalities of modernity and become its local heroes. However esteemed they may be when thought of as 'successful' men, however, their actions are limited when they encounter the more levelling discourse of the local political imaginary of age and generation, that is to say, the 'traditional.'

Making modern men: the state, capital and the *njuri nceke*

On one occasion, early on during my fieldwork, I sat in the shade of my

friend's veranda, waiting for him to return from town. A wealthy, sociable, and highly respected local businessman, this friend of mine was a Gîcunge and his age close to fifty-years old. I was sitting with his youngest son, when a neighbourhood elder dropped by for a visit. The little boy told the elder, "My Daddy's rich." To which the old man answered, "Maybe rich... one, two, three children, but I'm richer, I've thirteen grandchildren" (*'Babako ndiye mtajiri, ana... moja, wawili... watoto watatu, lakini mimi ni tajiri zaidi... ndîna ntagu babaingî ikûmi bathatû'*). In invoking the term, *ntagu*, meaning 'namesake', this elder demonstrated the generational difference between himself and the boy's father, and differentiated a sense of wealth in people from that of property. Although the number of the elder's *ntagu* was exaggerated, the little boy most certainly grasped the point.

Despite their four-wheel drives, foreign educations, managing directorships, large pension schemes, positions in the trade union, and so on, these modern men are divested of their status as elders. Here, some problems arise from the often romantic meanings Western ethnographers have attributed to the 'elder' in African societies. In Meru, elderhood has a much wider variety of meanings than is conveyed by the English term. Younger men may become *akûrû* (elders) when their own children have been initiated, but further distinctions apply and not all older men become, in the sense that I am drawing, elders. The examples of the *nkurumbu* and *ntûrîika* demonstrate cases of older men who are not elders. Elderhood, as it is spoken in Kîmerû, has much to do with the acquisition of knowledge and experience (but not necessarily 'wisdom' which European romanticism would be attracted to). The *njuri nceke*, for example, was once described to me as divided into hierarchical levels, each successive stage equivalent to new kinds of specialised knowledge. The metaphor used was 'primary', 'secondary', and 'university' educations, these signifying the various

njuri of *kîamotha*, *njuri îmbîngere*, and the *njuri îmbere*, each more selective and esoteric than the former. Once, when I attended a *kîama* hearing at Kitharene, Tigania, the row of young men I sat with were called ‘*nasari*’ (nursery school), indicating our immature status in, and knowledge of, the affairs of the litigants and their specialised way of speaking. For the newest Imenti *njuri nceke*, their status of elders is separated from their recognisably modern achievements and they must, as a neophyte, begin to learn in the localised idiom a way to act in a ‘traditional’ manner. In late colonialism, such men were often labelled as the ‘detribalised’ African, which pejoratively came to mean ‘neither modern European, nor conservative African.’ Yet, by sheer fact of their numbers, the enthusiasm for entering into the decision making process of the Imenti *njuri nceke* may be read to mean that something is to be gained. It is in this sense, then, that opportunities to venture into the local political imaginary may allow for new forms of accumulation which their status as ‘moderns’ formerly denied them.

A second, related question is equally pertinent. Is this renovation really such a new phenomenon in Imenti? The colonial archives demonstrate some interesting parallels between different historical moments spread over generational time. Hugh Lambert wrote extensive reports in the 1930s about the ‘Disintegration and Reintegration of the Meru Tribe.’³⁷ Much of his writing over the twenty or so years Lambert was a colonial administrator highlighted a seemingly unprecedented crisis in the morality of the Meru, despite the rich allegorical narratives about ‘moral’ and ‘immoral’ times within the Meru oral tradition itself. Based on his view that British administration had alienated itself from the ‘administrative use of the indigenous institutions’, Lambert argued that new colonial policies should ‘use and support the *Njuri*’ to instill discipline and ‘progress’ within the ‘tribe’ (Lambert 1939: 33).

³⁷ PC Central 2/1/11, ‘Disintegration / Reintegration’, ‘Meru Tribe’, by DC Hugh E. Lambert [KNA: 1939]

A 'modernisation' of the *njuri nceke* was effected in 1939 when the first Christians took an oath on the Bible, in lieu of other 'pagan' oaths, for their entry into the select council. As the 1940 Annual Report suggests, however, the entry of Methodist élites into the *njuri nceke*, most of whom were in the employ of the African District Council, the main wing of Indirect Rule in colonial Kenya, led to a standoff between Christians and the so-called 'conservatives.' In retrospect, this standoff had a regional dimension, with the Imenti drawn into conflict with the Tigania and Igembe. Lambert wrote that "the Njuri had never agreed to initiation by a Christian oath, but only to allow selected Christians to attend its deliberations on certain questions from time to time, if those Christians were sworn on the Bible to secrecy on each occasion" (KNA 1940: DC/MRU/1/4). A certain Father Whelan forbid Catholicised Meru to join the *njuri nceke* on pain of ex-communication, or, in the case of school pupils (which was unlikely), the threat was expulsion. Curiously, when the Consolata Mission expanded in Nyambene, where the *njuri nceke* was vibrant throughout the colonial period, the Catholics seem to have placed a greater emphasis on experimenting with syncreticism, especially with regard to age-class formation. As some of my Tigania informants liked to joke, "Ah, *batîrî* (Padre) pulls a blind eye to these things as long as you show up at Mass." With regard to the historicity of the Imenti *njuri nceke*, however, it may be possible to argue that, unlike the Tigania and Igembe *njuri*, it has always been modern.

This 'modernity' of the Imenti *njuri nceke* becomes clearer in the context of the 1950s. Towards the end of the 'Emergency', the colonial government devolved the responsibilities for governance even further to the Provincial Administration. In Nyambene forest, there were still guerrilla units committed to Mau Mau under General Mwariama (Njagi 1993), but the administration felt confident enough to

embark on ambitious plans for development under the rubric of Reconstruction, Rehabilitation, and Resettlement (RRR). It is possible to see this moment as a kind of last chance for the proponents of Indirect Rule to redeem themselves to the Colonial Office. An administrator working with the ADC explained how the *njuri* was to be resituated in the new policies: 'The Njuri can have a greater part in the framing of the policy to be adopted, and take the main responsibility for the modification of law and custom' (DC/MRU/7/1:28/1/55). Falling short of announcing decolonisation, the Colony of Kenya called for the setting up of a 'multi-racial government', even though Africans were still prohibited to form political parties until 1960. But this 'Africanisation' of the colonial government was limited and decidedly anti-nationalist. The idea in Meru was that the 'indigenous' institutions, which in this definition also included the ADC and the Native Tribunals, could be strengthened to the point where Kenya could still maintain a 'Dual Policy' system of rule when the moment for political independence came. The theme of 'new times' and 'development' inspired the Reconstruction Committee of Meru District to consider an alternative approach to colonial welfare schemes which included, not for the first time, the renovation of the *njuri nceke* alongside the building of cooperative marketing societies, credit groups, land resettlement boards, and an 'indigenised' form of National Youth Service. Still shaken by how close the colonial government came to losing control in Kenya during Mau Mau, the administration was keen to reconcile the differences between the 'modernists' and the 'traditionalists', with an eye to galvanise the already weakened colonial regime. There were frequent calls to 'encourage more of the enlightened younger men to be initiated into Njuri', as wrote the feminist missionary Mary Holding [KNA 1955: DC/MRU/2/2 #2]. The following missives put great emphasis on the 'modernisation' of the *njuri nceke* among the Meru.

It has been decided in Meru to make an effort to develop the indigenous system which has shown itself to be capable of adjusting itself to the new times, as experiment in Imenti has shown, and build up on the framework of the Njuri system an institution which can take over the responsibilities of present day administration, and to try to graft on to the roots the necessary new element to assist in that development... The Njuri can be reconstituted to close the gap if it can be persuaded to consider the new deeds and to adapt itself to the new influences. The first step which it has taken in this direction is to encourage as many enlightened members of the tribe as are keeping aloof from it to allow themselves to be initiated into the Njuri³⁸ [KNA 1955: DC/MRU/7/2]

Part of the work of the Team should include the preparations of recommendations for constitutional reform of the Njuri system, and try to set up a constitution within the indigenous body which will retain its character, and help it to develop into a progressive and elected governing body, which will be able to claim a representative place in the Government of the Colony [KNA 1955: DC/MRU/7/2]

The 'experiment in Imenti' consisted of enlisting 'enlightened members of the tribe' into a neo-traditional *njuri*. This was creatively mirrored by the invention of a parallel organisation of youth 'training camps' which were designed to instill the virtues of Meru 'citizenship.' Many of the youth who were slated to enter these 'training camps', which the administration anachronistically dubbed *gaarû* (warriors' barracks), had either been labour migrants during the Emergency or were 'rehabilitated' insurgents. The camps were optimistically called, 'Nthaka Gaaru for Training in Citizenship and the Execution of Communal Work', a name which barely concealed its ulterior motive of extracting free labour. A document related to these proposals stated:

They also considered the proposal for training Meru youths in 'Gaaru' before they go out of this district and decided that it was a matter of great importance. They would have learnt a great deal of Meru ways of life in the past and present and of future developments so that when they meet people of other tribes they would not fall prey to their bad teaching as has been the case in the years of 1948-1954 [KNA 1955: DC/MRU/7/1]

In the colonial imagination, this *gaarû* was said to be modelled on the office of the *lamalla*, but in Imenti, at least, this council of warrior-grade men had not been formed since the time of the *Pax Britannica* in 1908. Very few of my Imenti informants could

³⁸ This document is entitled 'Reconstruction #2' [KNA 1955: DC/MRU/7/2]

verify if they had participated in such *gaarû cîa therikali* (government youth camps), although some Ratanya from Mikinduri, Tigania, recalled being instructed to form credit groups and open tea-shops in the late 1950s, which earned them a local reputation as a drinking group (*gîkundi 'self-help' grubu*). This group's notoriety in recent years was extended, in the public's imagination, by the 'looting' of cooperative marketing societies and the failure of the coffee industry. At one *baraza* called in Maua, in 1955, a group of young men (probably Ratanya and Mîcûbû) demanded a meeting with the DO, the area Chief, and the *lamalla* to lobby for their inclusion in renovations of *njuri nceke* throughout the Igembe area. Titling the report 'Effect of the new attitude of the young men to the Njuri', the DO wrote enthusiastically about the day's events:

The young men had met earlier in the day apparently without any encouragement from the Chief or his elders. They eventually sent a deputation to the Chief who called the Ramare [*sic. lamalla*] elders to hear them. The young men, who consisted of newly initiated youths, ex-Mau Mau confessees, and men who had worked outside the District, submitted that they wished to be taught the traditions of the tribe, and to return to the old laws and customs, and discipline. They said they wished all loungers to be punished, and to stop drinking beer among the lower age groups. They were told of the intended Youth Training Scheme in Miiriga Mieru, and advised to discuss with the elders of the Mwiriga [clan] a means of providing some funds, and the possibility of instituting a similar scheme... Both elders and young men agreed to do this [KNA 1955: DC/MRU/7/1/2]

What is striking about this document are the arguments for a 're-traditionalisation' in the wake of the tumultuous 1950s. The 'forced circumcisions' occurring in Imenti which were introduced above may be a contemporary manifestation of a recurrent formula for youth dissent, only just hinted at in the above colonial report. Although the idea of Meru institutions being 'dormant in the recent past' recurs with remarkable frequency in the colonial archival records, it is a curious that this discourse, consisting of 'key words' such as *njuri nceke*, *nthaka*, even *gaarû*, should be occurring in the

ethnographic present of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Anne-Marie Peatrik drew a historical parallel between the late 1980s Meru she knew with the archives depicting a crisis ridden and precarious Meru of the 1930s (Peatrik 1999). More than the specific reconstruction of historical experiences, however, what such documents strongly suggest is that where outsiders have consistently interpreted political crises in Meru to be the unprecedented heralding of a new age and the passing of the old order, other evidence shows that these oscillations between the new and the old are the outcome of problems with outsiders' historical perspectives.

CHAPTER FIVE

Looking for Work: labour migration and accumulation

Gûcwa Ngûgi: ballads of the unemployed and homesick

A once popular Kîmerû musician, Gitonga Kathuma, sang what was to become an anthem for young men coming of age during the late 1960s. It was called, simply, 'Looking for Work.' Kathuma was most popular among the Imenti, alongside an equally renowned folksinger, George King'ua, who was his contemporary. Kathuma's song *Gûcwa Ngûgi*, or, 'Looking for Work', was born of his experiences as a young man who tried his luck in different jobs outside of Meru. Travelling in the newly independent Kenya, Kathuma's expectations of the *matunda ya uhuru*, the 'fruits of freedom', must have been dashed, for he latterly wrote and performed popular songs which reached a broad Kîmerû-speaking audience with similarly bittersweet feelings about being young in the 1960s. In this Kenya, where the world was optimistically 'on the move' and where many believed in something called 'development', lay more painful recognitions of the crises which decolonisation had exposed but which people were ill-prepared to resolve. The compulsion to migrate in search of work, leaving behind the familiarity and the security of one's home, was one of many crises which could be experienced by large numbers of people. Evoking the homesickness of living as a farm worker in Naro Moro township and of eking out a living in Nairobi, Kathuma's lyrics still resonate with the experiences of those looking for work today. Another crisis in the late 1960s was the anxiety about the cultural

gaps in the experiences of the young and the old. Whether this is an ubiquitous historical, or existential, problem is probably moot to those Meru coming of age during the 1960s, who expressed their historicity as a kind of 'rupture' which, ironically, echoed loudly with the tumult of the Mau Mau insurgency of the previous decade. When put into their historical context, all of Kathuma's lyrics engage in a locally salient debate in Meru about the 'breakdown of tradition' and 'modernisation' during the first decade of Kenya's political independence.

Reconstructing the historicity of Kenyans born before the '*uhuru* generation', those who never experienced colonial rule, proved to be a labyrinth-like task of collecting biographies representing the youth of the 1960s which, to some degree, could be interpreted alongside the music and lyrics of recording artists such as Gitonga Kathuma and George King'ua. My interest in such musicians was provoked by questioning whether the historicity of any given past might well be grasped through looking at its art. For their contemporaries of the Kîbaabu and Gîcunge age-classes, as well as for those born after them, this music described a kind of cultural threshold between the ways of their parents and the new horizons then being encountered. Listening to such songs was like someone of my generation listening to Bob Dylan's *Tangled Up In Blue*. Not surprisingly, when young people listened to Kathuma's songs many of the idioms he sang through were not immediately grasped, as they were specific to Meru social life of the sixties', or else played upon more anachronistic 'traditional' categories of thought which were no longer salient. *Gûcwa Ngûgi*, however, linked me to the lore of migration which seemed to be part of many persons' biographies who were youth during this time:

Ndaumîre Merû, ndeeta Nairobi
[I moved from Meru to go to Nairobi]

Gúcwa ngúgi, ntamíonere.
 [Looking for work, I didn't get]
Ndathitithie úú ntuku íthatú,
 [Spending three whole nights]
Ntína gíntú gíakûruma.
 [With nothing to bite]

Ndabwerenca úú nthaka cíetú cíá Kíbaabu na Gícunge
 [I implore you all, *nthaka* Kíbaabu and Gícunge]
Júkia gíáú nojúkia gícembe, búgwatane búrí harambee.
 [Take up a panga, grab a jembe, Let's unite in harambee]

Jaja ímantú jaría ndoneere ríría ndetíre ítú bwa Nairobi
 [All these things I'd see there when I went to Nairobi]
Ndathúganagía ndeeta Nairobi, nkathíthía mantú jakurígaria,
 [I thought if I got there, I'd do surprising things]

Ndoona baagí barí na ngarí ndathúganagia ní nkamígúra,
 [Seeing all those people with cars, I thought I'd buy mine]
Ndamamaga ítú magari ne jaría jateegi ní mûcûbarí
 [I slept in a husk of a car, thrown away by the Council]³⁹

This song, abbreviated here, captures the uncertainty of migration to Nairobi. High expectations of success could fade to poverty and privation in the harshness of urban conditions. The symbols of postcolonial modernity, such as waged employment, material possessions, and the dream of improvement are all juxtaposed with the symbols of the developing, rural homeland which musicians like Kathuma draped in nostalgia. The postcolonial rural community was no longer a fringe, but a network around which the Republic was to be built. Commercial agriculture organised around the integration of smallholders into cooperative marketing societies came to define 'agricultural development' planning around the expansion of high-value export crops such as coffee and tea (Heyer, Maitha, and Senga 1976). The large estates in the former 'white highlands' continued to be of economic significance and provided employment to migrant labourers as they had for decades. In the late 1960s, ambitious road building projects were underway, accelerating the movement of people between

³⁹ From the album *Gitonga Kathuma: Original* (1979?). Assistance in transcribing and translating the works of a number of Kimeru popular musicians was given by Godfrey Muriuki, of Kaaga, Mĩriiga Mĩerũ (2001).

rural and urban places of work and residence. Colonial laws demanding permits for travel and employment had been abandoned and replaced by a constitutional right to live and work anywhere (which in practice is sometimes transgressed). Kenya had won its political independence and its agrarian heartlands were undergoing fundamental transformations. Land resettlement was a major priority for the postcolonial government. Despite the current opinion about this decade as a period of optimism, there are historical sources which suggest that it was also a period of emerging contradictions, especially in differing visions of modernity and the emergence of new inequalities which reflected the new moment in Kenya's capitalist political-economic development (cf. Swainson 1980).

One of these contradictory views was whether or not there was value in retaining the institutional vestiges of either 'African traditional values' or the political residues of Indirect Rule.⁴⁰ Categories of personhood had to be reworked into recognisably 'modern' forms, consistent with the renovation of the postcolonial legal system. Against the rhetoric of nation building, local categories of personhood and the ritual processes through which they were fashioned were reduced to caricatures of the quaint rural hillbilly or 'backward' peasant. In such a context, the seemingly 'archaic' forms of social organisation, in which age-classes could be counted, required their own 'modernisation.' Yet, such forms of organisation had already undergone tremendous change, generation to generation, and looked as if they would anxiously fail to remain significant in the reconstruction of the Meru as a 'modern' community (of argument). The increasing demands placed upon young people to migrate outside the Meru District in search of schooling, training, or employment provoked serious anxieties

⁴⁰ See Thomas 2003 for an insightful discussion about Meru debates on the redefinition of the 'customary' in postcolonial Kenya, especially focusing of the interculturality in reworking moral definitions of personhood against the residual 'legal' categories embedded in Indirect Rule (Thomas 2003: 103-34).

about the continuation of age-class formation and the institutions which it indirectly effected. Alongside other local intellectuals and artists, musicians of the period placed *nthukî* at the heart of debates about the ‘breakdown of tradition’ and the anxieties of ‘modernisation’ (see Chapters Two, Seven and Eight).

Yet, is it not possible that movement, of migration into Meru and migration out of Meru, has somehow been an integral challenge to age-class formation throughout the twentieth century and possibly before? In introducing the problem of migration for age-class formation and the construction of a Meru community of argument, I have found folksongs produced in the late 1960s to be invaluable historical sources. The value of Kathuma’s musical appraisal of this period is that he found a way to express the everyday ways in which people could simultaneously be frustrated by their expectations of ‘progress’ and self-improvement while constructing for themselves something of a past ‘golden era’ into which they knitted hope and nostalgia together. Perhaps more than any other person, the migrant was a subject to which Kathuma’s musical rhetoric about cultural loss and melancholy spoke most convincingly.

In another of Kathuma’s memorable songs, *Gwetû Îkûraja* (Far from Home), the listener is invited to share in the migrant’s longing for his or her home, a world bereft of kin and age-mates while living in the settlements of the Laikipia plains, an area of large commercial farms which employed many Meru and Gikuyu labourers from colonial times to the present.

Kabarigarîre acoore bakwa bonthe
 [All my friends were surprised]
baigua nandî gwîita -
 [hearing I was now gone]
îtû tûrîtieni nkatho ntûûra-e-Naro-Moro
 [please we thank Naro Moro village]
ntîûmba gûkaara naja
 [I’m unable to live here]

Gwetû nî kûraja ntûûrene ya Merû
 [Far from Home, in Meru village]
mûtanocîa înao akaraaga -
 [my brother lives there]
ndîuga ambite nao gacîonere mama-o-kwa
 [I say, I will go there to see my old mother]
ntîûmba gûkaara nînka
 [I'm unable to live alone]

In this song, the imaginary space of the migrant is one of loneliness and homesickness, even of anomie and depression. In being separated from a sense of belonging, Kathuma's ballad expresses a kind of refusal on behalf of the migrant, "I'm unable to live alone" ('*ntîûmba gûkaara nînka*'). In both of these ballads, the countryside is metonymically linked to a proper sense of morality, whereas the city is reflected upon as a place where one can get separated from one's self. Living alone in an abandoned husk of a car, with nothing to eat, the city becomes the opposite of countryside living, where there are houses to live in and commensality is taken seriously. To give a recent illustration of this construction of the countryside as a moral space, peoples' etiologies of the spread of HIV/AIDS (*mûtheera*, *mûkingo*) often pivoted upon descriptions of sexually predatory urban men who sought 'virginal' sex in the countryside, hence, infecting 'healthy' rural dwellers with the disease. To rural thought, AIDS is an immoral force which comes from the urban exterior. Likewise, the first cases of gonorrhea (*gatego*) in Tigania during the early 1940s were associated with the urban prostitutes which Mîcûbû labour migrants purportedly slept with in Nairobi and Mombasa.⁴¹ The city and the town, likewise, are places of anomie and of 'getting lost', whereas the countryside is a place of 'home' and of moral order. Songs about migration play upon this moral (dis)ordering of social space.

To the Kîmerû listener, however, Kathuma's two songs about migration also

⁴¹ Luise White's (1990) well-researched study of prostitution in urban Kenya during the same period provides some context for historicising the construction of men's moral constructions of urban and rural space.

contain references to age-classes as a kind of metaphor which, for our purposes here, require some further explication. In 'Looking for Work', the motif of the age-class is evoked to invert the desperate situation of urban migrant returnees, who spurned by their failure to find a job, may return to their homeland and vindicate their sense of loss through pulling together, amongst age-mates, in working the land and the soil. This Kîmerû song is perhaps a modern parable on the individualist fallacy; perhaps echoing John Donne in stressing the essential intersubjectivity of human life, 'No man is an Island, entire of its Self; Every Man is a Piece of the Continent, a Part of the Maine' (Donne 1624; quoted in Jackson 1998). But amongst the Kîbaabu and Gîcunge, the two Imenti *nthukî* with whom Kathuma identified himself with, the ideological pull of self-help (*harambee*) in the late 1960s would have had to contend with sharpening social differentiation and the emergence of new inequalities. Age-classes were, in lyrical terms, a focal point for discussing the material and moral consequences of these changes taking place in the early postcolony. The changing sense of selfhood and personhood which accompanies movement, especially labour migration, while hardly new, could be drawn back into the local political imagination through critical reworkings of what it meant to be a member of a particular age-class at a time of rapid social and cultural transformation. From Kathuma's portrait of the migrant subjectivity, especially of the historicity of his Kîbaabu and Gîcunge age-mates, come significant questions about the social construction of age-classes in the context of migration.

This chapter argues that migration was a sociologically disruptive force in the process of forming successive age-classes. As the songs demonstrate, however, the effects of migration were implicated in the ongoing construction of different generations' historicity, as moments in a long-term story about the Meru as a

community of debate. In focusing on migration in the context of age-class formation, my intention is to draw attention to how Meru have continued to debate their community in terms of the 'breakdown of tradition' and 'modernisation' paradigm. Hints of rural economic class formation are also traced into this analysis. Two distinctions must be made in respect to my interpretive schemes in this chapter. On the one hand, I privilege the sociology of age-class formation when discussing how migration contributed to the emergence of interstitial categories of personhood in the late 1940s among the Tigania. On the other, however, I also lace my arguments with examples where the disruptive cycles of labour migration have also contributed to the construction of community in the more remote of Nyambene's rural valleys, places which have only managed to enter the wider political-economy through the experiences and material accumulation of their migrating residents. In order to contextualise what migration meant to my Meru informants, I introduce the issues to be explored through a very brief sketch of movement as a significant theme in Meru historiography.

From 'Native Reserve' to 'labour reserve': Meru on the move

The first massive trend towards labour migration was triggered by the Great War (1914-1918). Although colonial troops from several British territories fought in the East African campaigns, most Kenyans were recruited into ancillary roles, such as portage and food provisioning. Like many 'Tribal Reserves' in the British East African Protectorate, Meru provided the colonial war effort with non-combatant manpower. In the space of a few years, thousands of young *nthaka* were recruited into the East African Carrier Corps. Indeed, among the Imenti, those who experienced the military

campaigns in Tanganyika became known back home in Meru as the *Kaaria* (carrier), derived from their wartime role as conscripts in the *Kariorkor* (Carrier Corps) (Fadiman 1993). The effects of this novel form of migration upon Kimeru-speaking communities were complex. Epidemiologically, Meru communities were to suffer high mortality in the post-war influenza pandemic, brought by the return of infected troops to their home areas. Socially, the opening up of African districts like Meru to labour recruitment instituted migration as a long-term solution to the transformations in the life-course overtly created under the imperial *Pax Britannica*. Notwithstanding the periods covering the East African campaigns ending in 1918, the colonial administration had outlawed all forms of warriorhood, thus depriving young men, in particular, of their socially constituted vocation as warriors. The reports of administrators during this early colonial period detailed the social problems associated with young men, including drunkenness, sexual licentiousness and acts of banditry. The latter had been created by the outlawing of raiding, a ruling which was resisted by some elements of the warrior classes throughout the protectorate. The collapse of discipline among the warrior ranks resulting in the use of alcohol and the emergence of a new form of sexuality was attributed to the weakening of the indigenous polity and its demographic regime, which restricted the sexuality of its youth. Labour recruitment and the migration of youth was viewed as an amelioration of the conditions of inactivity, boredom and poverty which gripped youth during early colonial rule. As such, labour recruitment was seen as part of Britain's pledge to bring order to East Africa through the transfer of civilisation and commerce. Locally, with no socially acceptable role to play, migration outside of Meru became an alternative form of livelihood for *nthaka*. This was a preferable alternative to the colonial policy of compelling young men of the warrior grade towards agricultural labour, which was

widely felt to be an indignant form of work among this category of personhood. Since this early colonial period, movement in search of work and a wage has since been part of the lore through which each successive Meru generation has constructed their separate identities.

Among Imenti residents, many of the most aged men experienced successive periods of migration which reflected government intervention and the labour needs of Kenya Colony's nascent agricultural commercialisation. Although there were partial collapses of the labour market in the late 1920s and during the Depression of the 1930s, most elder informants' biographies contained episodes where they remained outside of Meru for most of their youth, only returning at the age of being eligible for marriage and raising children. Initiated in the mid-1930s, the nickname of some Kaburu was *kîrugî*, a mildly derogative term meaning a 'little cook.' The example of this grouping, the Kaburu or Kîruja, demonstrated their positionality within an emergent system of short-term, poorly paid jobs available to male residents of the 'Tribal Reserves.' The imposition of an efficient tax collection system, based on the number of huts within the compounds of domestic groups, provoked greater numbers of migrants to lessen the burden on their families through movement to the farms and workplaces of Nairobi, Thika, Nanyuki, Timau and even Mombasa. The *kîrugî* were an unprecedented group of young men, recognisable for their ill-placed domesticity, a role which conflicted with local allocations of labour through gender. They were the first historical grouping of men to turn to agricultural production upon their return to Meru and eat foods traditionally reserved for women. Indeed, one of my older interlocutors, a Kîruja who had cooked for an Asian household in Nairobi as a youngster specifically conformed to this social and economic career. Although a recent initiate when he was employed as a domestic worker, the kind of *nthaka*-hood he



Plate 10: M'Ncebere worked in Nairobi in the 1920s (2001)

experienced was unprecedented and remarkable in local terms. Their livelihoods brought them into close contact with the culture of colonialism, which although deeply racialised, advocated personal improvement through capital accumulation, albeit petty. The result for many of this Imenti age-class was cycles of labour migration compelled largely by the poverty and privation of agricultural work on the estates of the settler economy. Summary dismissals from employment mirrored the crises and contradictions which waged workers and their employers were both subject to. Alternative forms of migration entailed taking up trade, usually in agricultural goods such as tobacco or smallstock for whom buyers could be found en route to one job or another. Some of my Imenti informants who were youth during the 1930s also experienced a dislocation with respect to their incorporation into an age-class, with several of them being positioned within a category called *kîmonye*, falling somewhere in between their elders of Kaburu or Kîruja and their juniors initiated as Mbaya or Mbai during the early 1950s. The *kîmonye* made up the bulk of Imenti conscripts during the Second World War who were absent from Meru for most of the 1940s.

Although labour recruiters worked out of market centres like Maua, in the Nyambenes, the colonial administration was clearly less concentrated than that around Mount Kenya. District Officers went on *safari* (official trips) on foot to visit distant government headmen (*kaborio*) and compile their reports. In 1948, the government sought any way to compel local youths to work on government 'development' projects in the Meru locations. Examples of this included road repair, terracing land, digging toilets, and attending *baraza* where the colonial officers and their African counterparts would introduce new regulations and law, or demonstrate some agricultural 'improvement.' By the entanglement of indigenous and colonial ideas, however, the DOs could not force uncircumcised youth to work, although the initiated

were subject to personal taxation. An unwritten rule was that 'young men who have just been circumcised must work' (DC/MRU/2/2/1948). A report written in 1948 demonstrates that European colonial officers considered Meru distinctions between uncircumcised 'children' and circumcised 'youth' problematic, but unavoidable in the carrying out of their jobs as labour recruiters:

Met three uncircumcised young men who were definately mature and able to do terracing but aren't dpong so. I would have certainly passed them as being old enough to pay tasc [*sic*]. I understand that there are many as old as 20 who have not been circumcised and yet don't do terracing [DC/MRU/2/2/1948]

British understandings of age-specific relations would place a twenty-year old as a 'youth', and on this basis, justify the compulsion towards public service. Hundreds of thousands of similarly aged 'youth' had, after all, been killed in the Second World War. To the Meru, however, it was far from unusual to find 'over-aged' uncircumcised boys who, waiting years to join a circumcision grouping, would effectively remain children until then, despite their age. Frustrated by the reluctance of Nyambene peoples to accomodate the labour requirements set by colonial officers and headmen, a DO called Syne-Thompson appropriated a rhetoric derived from the Second World War, clamouring 'Tigania needs a shaking up and is ripe for a continuing blitz next year' (ibid.).

Migration, then, has become one of the defining characteristics of Meru age-class formation since the 1940s. As fieldwork continued, it became clearer that migration from one's natal or marital location presented particular problems for age-class formation and, indeed, for the wider generational complex. I began to approach questions about how migration, in particular, had effected the formation of differing age-classes. I also wondered how persons, families and communities had transformed the generational system to cope with it. Because the compulsion to struggle in

Kenya's economy makes migration periodically necessary, almost every person will, at some point in their life, have something to say about the inevitability of movement and relocation.

Not only is the contemporary history of migration complex, but its spatial dimensions are vast. Outside of higher education, where Meru migrate to India, Europe, and North America for university studies and employment opportunities, the growth of the *miraa* industry has also led to global networks of Meru traders whose economic activities are best described as transnational (cf. Carrier 2003). This raises significant methodological queries about the nature of ethnographic evidence in the study of migration. Although spatial movements over long distances defines migration at its most general level, a more inclusive conception of migration returns to localisable movements: such as the movement of a new bride to her husband's home; or, the crises of illegitimacy that many children experience at the interstices of a domestic group. While keeping scope of the regional, national and global political-economy in which migration occurs, in contemporary Meru, it is equally sound to explore how movement is an expectation of all adults' lives and the immediate experience of a large number of children.

However specific to different persons' narratives, the telling of the individual biography falls into identifiable patterns. A context begins to emerge when different cases are compared. Each pattern of migration identified tells a significant story about what it is possibly like to be a particular kind of person at a specific point in their life-course. The ethnographic treatment of Gikuyu migrants to Laikipia District over several generations by Yvan Droz (1999) resonates with that encountered in greater Meru. Frank Bernard's study of Meru agriculture in transition (1972), as well as his paper on the Kenyan spatial economy (1979), provides perhaps the best introduction

to the specificity of Nyambene and Mount Kenya's agrarian transition for the periods 1890 - 1950. The treatment of migration presented here relates to its impact on the transition of Meru social structure in the latter half of the twentieth century.

In particular, this chapter examines how the movement of large numbers of young men at different historical periods created challenges to the successive formation of age-classes. Labour migration not only made possible the accumulation of capital, however petty, but it also introduced new forms of inequality and new mediums for symbolic capital. Critical to these developments were the emergence of new subjectivities and definitions of personhood. In particular, labour migration created the context where individuals could be circumcised but not initiated into an age-class. The increased costs of ceremonies which rose with the commercialisation of local agriculture, as well as the absence from Meru of large numbers of youth in their early adulthood, created the circumstances where the expectations of 'tradition' clashed with the compulsions of the colonial economy.

The introduction of new interstitial categories of person in the 1940s, in central and northern Tigrania, especially those of the *bûrukû* - circumcised youth positioned outside of an age-class - presents the opportunity to discuss how the movement of large numbers of youth during the years approaching adolescence, for work or for schooling, had resulted in a significant modification to age-class formation under the generational polity. Additionally, an ethnographic description of a Nyambene community, Giithû (eastern Tigrania) addresses how long-term patterns of migration since the 1930s has shaped transitions within the construction of community. Perhaps representative of many Nyambene valley communities remote from major markets, Giithû presents an example of an interior community socially transformed by migration.

Bûrukû: interstitial categories of person in Nyambene during the 1940s

Beginning in the late 1930s, how did the increasing number of youth leaving Meru effect the timing and cohesion of age-class formation? By mid-century, rosters compiled by the provincial administration enumerated thousands of young labour migrants, each of whom required the necessary permits and identification papers facilitating movement outside the Meru 'tribal reserve.' The bolstered efficacy of the administration placed a premium upon bureaucratic tools of state, including registration and enumeration of eligible tax payers. In the absence of accurate demographic figures prior to the 1948 National Census, colonial administrators estimated these numbers to be in their thousands, without giving supplementary percentages of those who remained in the district. Nevertheless, informants who were old enough to experience labour migration in the changing colonial economy were almost unanimous in narrating some form of migration or another during the period concerned (1935-1952). Whether as traders, domestic servants, military personnel, or farm labourers many of the biographies collected with former labour migrants - especially elder men of the age-class Mîcubu and their Imenti counterparts, the Kîruja or Kaburu - provide significant testimony to the entrenched crises the generational system endured during the expansion of the agrarian economy in the periods before and after the Second World War.

Not only was Kenya's colonial economy undergoing the first phases of internal expansion under capitalism, but there were new levels of commercialisation on the fringes of the settler economy which provided a steady outflux of men and women from the poverty stricken rural frontiers. In places like Meru, the 1930s had been

economically crippling. New political institutions, such as the Local Native Council based in Meru Town, increased the general taxation upon the population which, in turn, compelled a mostly young and male class of persons to migrate elsewhere in search of paid work. It was from out of this context of enhanced outward migration that the *bûrukû* emerged.

I had first heard this word, *bûrukû*, used to describe categories of boys who were circumcised without belonging to a specific *îtaana*. While not an age-class, mention of the so-called *bûrukû* was made in reference to a specific category of person whose circumcision fell outside of a given *îtaana*. During the December 2002 initiations in Mikinduri, several boys were circumcised by force and these individuals were described to me as *bûrukû*. The reasoning behind forced circumcisions are always obscure, but inquiries were met with responses that the boys had fathered small children while still of *mwîjî* status; or that they were of an advanced age and could not afford to arrange their own sponsorship, letting this responsibility fall upon the public and the *lamalla*. There were additional uses of the term. On occasion, I was also told that the yet un-named Gîcungî, initiated continuously since 1996, were to be considered *bûrukû* because they had not performed *kûrîria*, marking the opening and closing of specific *mataana*. At first, I was prepared to compare the Tigania term *bûrukû* with the Imenti *kîroge* - those boys circumcised in a public health clinic or under local anaesthetic - but ongoing investigation into the application of the category placed it historically with events and processes occurring in the 1930s.

Several contradictory explanations of the *bûrukû* were offered to me, each of which reflects differing perspectives on the specificity of crises within the generational polity. In the first version, the roots of the crisis stem back to the strained relationship between Kiramunya and Ithaliî over the initiation of the new Mîcûbû beginning in

1933 (see Chapter Four). Other perspectives come together on the changing political-economy of colonial Kenya during this period and reflect on the impact migration had upon social structure. In order to discuss the significance of the *bûrukû*, a category of initiate described as falling in between or outside of *mataana* and *nthukî*, it is necessary to present an integrated analysis of both versions.

Several ageing Ithaliî in central Tigania, comprising Mikinduri, Ankamia, Giithû and Kunatî, gave roughly overlapping accounts of how and why the category of *bûrukû* emerged from the late 1930s onwards. According to these surviving Ithaliî, old men now in their nineties', there had been an intense rivalry between the opposing *gîtîba* when Kiramunya prepared their sons for initiation as Mîcûbû. These informants spoke of *ngolo ya Kiramunya*; or, the jealousy of Kiramunya towards Ithaliî. Within the structure of age-class formation during the 1930s when Mîcûbû *ndinguri* were initiated, inter-class rivalry used to be assuaged ritually through the giving of feast-bulls (*ndegwa cîa beethe*, lit. 'the bulls of the Fathers'). These bulls were given by the class of 'fathers' to the class sponsoring the initiations of their 'sons.'⁴² In this case, the sponsors of the Mîcûbu *ndinguri*, those of the Ithaliî *kobia* or *kabeeria*, did not receive the bulls, thus the narrative elaboration of Kiramunya's jealousy (*ngolo, ngoa*) or envy (*rûriitho*) towards the opposing *gîtîba*. Referring to this initial incident of envy, it is often claimed that "*ngoa cîa Kiramunya gûtaana kîrî nthukî ingî*" ('Kiramunya's envy led them to refuse their sons to be initiated by another age-class'). Of this air of rivalry, elders point to Kiramunya's break with the orthodoxy of gifting between classes when succession was being organised.

A parallel may be drawn with Kiramunya and Ithaliî's Imenti counterparts, the

⁴² For a suggestive ethnographic parallel see Simonse's (1992) discussion of the 'bulls of reconciliation' given by a senior age-class to an ascendent class among the Lotuho of southwestern Sudan, revoking the social rivalry set in motion during the latter's agitation for class formation.

Mûrungî and Miriti, during roughly the same historical conjuncture. As reported by a colonial official:

During the year there was some delay in the initiations, due to the 'ntuiko' ceremonies and to the fact that the new ruling age-grade had not yet eaten the 'ntuto' feast. But by the end of the year there were very few nubile girls in the district who remained uninitiated. The Miriti of Igoki in Miiiriga Mieru initiated their daughters without first eating the 'ntuto'. This was in accordance with the permissible but uncommon practice of previous age-grades. It caused some temporary annoyance to the Murungi who, getting no share in a feast they had been expecting, tried to make an inter-grade dispute out of it [KNA 1942: DC/MRU/1/1/4]

As with other transformations made to the generational system, Kiramunya's refusal to give bulls to Mîcûbû's fathers resulted in a structural tension in the organisation of social life along generational lines. Despite the versions of Kiramunya-Ithaliî rivalry, the social and political significance of the event continued to effect future age-classes in formation. This was especially true for the 'sons' of Ithaliî, the Ratanya, who were beginning to be initiated by the latter 1940s.

The social complexity of this period's age-class formation cannot be understood without reference to the demographics (and marriage patterns) of the groups involved. Kiramunya were remembered for having been a demographically large group which were devastated by a sustained period of high mortality rates. Following the famines of *Kîaramûû* and *Kîrîanduara*, as well as outbreaks of disease, the Kiramunya were a diminutive group by the time they themselves had families. One Mîcubu remembers men and women of his parent's age-class having facial pockmarks, the scars of chicken pox and measles, while adding that they were also few in number. Chicken-pox (*mûthanduku*) was said to have killed almost all of the Kiramunya *ndinguri*. Indeed, information on the timing of Kiramunya's *mataana* is weak, perhaps emphasising their loss. Although the Ithaliî were also to suffer a significant mortality

rate as youth, there is a general consensus among surviving informants that a greater proportion of this class reached the grade of parents.

According to Anne-Marie Peatrik (2000), the social progeny of Kiramunya, the Mîcubu, also suffered high mortality rates, owing to the large numbers of Mîcubu *ndinguri* and *kobia* recruited into the Kenyan regiments of the King's African Rifles (KAR) on the outbreak of war in 1939. Sent to combat theatres in Ethiopia, Italian Somaliland, Libya and Burma many Mîcubu did not return to their homes after the war was declared over. While Kiramunya and their sons fought in the first and second world wars, the age-classes of Ithaliî and Ratanya were formed in times of peace and, despite the terrible droughts and famines experienced by this *gîtîba* (Ntangî), local elders suggested that their numbers exceeded those formed in the opposite *gîtîba* (Mbaine). Although evidence on the demographic imbalances between the *gîtîba* Mbaine and Ntangî (known as Kîruka and Ntîba in Imenti) is circumstantial and dependent upon the statements of a small number of aged persons, the crises that gave momentum to a growing number of *bûrukû* are suggestive that historically differential mortality rates between the *gîtîba* was borne out in their uneven numbers.

The *bûrukû* are an exceptional element in the generational system which merits critical attention. Almost all informants in central Tigania asserted that the majority of *bûrukû* were initiated from the Kianjai area in northern Tigania.⁴³ Today, Kianjai is a busy, roadside market town whose access to the tarmac road running the length of the Nyambene Range is its most lucrative asset. Even in the 1940s, when the first *bûrukû* started to appear, Kianjai was an exchange hub in the colonial economy, especially with regards to smallstock markets. A common explanation given was that *bûrukû*

⁴³ I could not ascertain during fieldwork, if the distinction over the initiation of *bûrukû* between Athwana and Kianjai was based on a larger Tigania moiety which unites together under the generational system (cf. Bernardi 1959; Mahner 1979; Peatrik 2000).

were boys who had migrated outside of the district for work or schooling and had come back too late to be initiated into their appropriate *nthukî*, thus falling into a category between age-classes. Many of the 'sons' of Kiramunya - who would have been initiated as Mîcûbû following the respective timing of their *mataana* in 1933, 1936, and 1940 - had left Meru for work in the tea and coffee estates of the settler economy. Some were also school pupils enrolled in African-only schools such as Alliance Boys. Those who were not initiated as Mîcûbû, or Ratanya should their fathers have accepted initiating their sons into the opposing *gîîba*, were circumcised with disregard to the formation of any particular age-class. Whatever the specific biographical case, such persons were deprecated against by some, being seen as *igî* (despicable) and even polluted, because they were socially out of place. To draw upon a more structured theory, they were neither *kabeeria* of a class A, nor *ndinguri* of a class B. Gleaned entirely from the accounts of surviving Ithaliî and Mîcubu elders, quite a number of over-aged sons of Kiramunya, many of them labour migrants, were compelled to be circumcised outside of any *nthukî* or *mataana*. These young men formed the new interstitial category of *bûrukû*. For their fathers, this meant that they were not initiated into the opposing *gîîba*, Ntangî, which opened with the initiation of the Ratanya *ndinguri* in 1946-1947.

Several informants in Mûthaara, however, challenged the interpretations about *bûrukû* I had been building from peoples' statements in central Tigania. In discussions which began with the general problems of 'over' and 'under' aging, I learned that the opening of Mîcûbû *kabeeria* had been postponed because of a food shortage caused by drought and the failure of the millet harvests. This ecological postponement of Mîcûbû *kabeeria* gave rise to the emergence of the *bûrukû* in the years to come, since those who did not recover from the famine, but who were supposed to be initiated as

Mîcûbû *kabeeria*, were displaced from the categories of the existing age-class system by being circumcised after Mîcûbû had closed.

From the perspective of Jürg Mahner's (1975) description of the Tigania age-class system as a marriage system, the *bûrukû* were subject to severe restrictions. Positioned at the interstices of social categories of age and generation, these 'sons' of Kiramunya were disqualified from marrying women who were preferential spouses for their contemporaries, the Mîcûbû and Ratanya. While the *bûrukû* were circumcised, they were, in the eyes of many, not initiated and, hence, gradeless. Being gradeless in this context meant that a person could remain liminal with respect to many of life's significant events, such as marriage, entry into a local council, and arranging the circumcision or marriages of one's children. The significant consequence of the new category of the *bûrukû* lies in their interstitial positionality with respect to the generational system.

Considered *igîi*, these persons could not marry girls identified as potential spouses through reference to the generational principle and its alteration between classes of social 'fathers' and 'daughters.' Even to this day, the *bûrukû* are tarnished by their assumed *igîi*, being reputed to have been sexually licentious and impregnating uninitiated girls because they fell outside of the generational system. The *bûrukû* were not subject to all of a particular *nthukî*'s rules, thus being displaced figures in the disintegrative indigenous polity. Originally, the reputed *igîi* attributed to the *bûrukû* may have arisen less from actual sexual behaviour, than from their ambiguous status with regard to the two overlapping conceptions of incest; that within the domestic sphere; and that separating parental and filial generations.⁴⁴ This ambivalence of incest

⁴⁴ Peatrik's (1999: 89) distinction between familial and generational incest invokes two terms, *wi'njanga* and *kioncho* respectively, but do not conform to the interpretations given by informants in central Tigania.

categories, as they applied to the *bûrukû*, helped to create them as deviants. Since *bûrukû* were structurally outside of the age and generational system, finding brides was difficult, forcing them to the margins of legitimate marriage. They were reputed to be the only young men marrying their social ‘mothers’, often older women who had been previously married, but cast out of their marital home for either abandoning their children (*nthûngûthû*), or for being labelled *igîi* through improper sexual liaisons. They were said to marry ‘worthless’ women, perhaps even finding a bride from among the *ngîrani*, a clan barred from marrying exogamously.⁴⁵

On the other hand, however disenfranchised from legitimate marriage and procreation, their interstitial positionality allowed them a latitude of social action not tolerated among fully initiated, integrated and representative young men. Being categorical outsiders within the generational polity, a select few and, in particular, those who had been schooled, managed to secure positions of authority within the colonial regime. One prominent *bûrukû*, Bernard Mate, is today renowned as a LEGCO representative involved in the negotiation of Kenya’s independence in the late 1950s. While alienated from the indigenous polity, their historicity was marked by a lack of constraint in operating within the politics of nationalism. What is ethnographically revealing, however, is that their exceptional status draws attention to the possible crises engendered by ‘over’ and ‘under’ aging within any age-class system based upon generational criteria of initiation. Furthermore, their social positionality, unprecedented at the time, was made possible by the heterodox actions of their class of ‘fathers’, the Kiramunya, to introduce new responses to social problems as they presented themselves.

⁴⁵ For an interesting comparison between the Rendille *sapaade* girls and the Meru *ngîrani* see Roth 1993.

Giithû valley: a case study of the effects of labour migration upon the construction of community

To be specific about migration's effects upon local communities, the case of Giithû presents itself well because the residence patterns of its people have shifted remarkably over three generations. The case is particular to rural communities spatially disengaged from market centres. Dozens of communities in eastern Tigrania and southeastern Igembe may be compared to the valley community of Giithû. Often sandwiched between the hotter, semi-arid plains below and the higher elevation where production is concentrated, the smaller fringe communities depend upon a fragile local market mostly based on food. Although both coffee and *miraa* have been planted, at differing periods, the absence of effective transportation and all-weather roads have stunted the marketing of these crops. Livelihoods in Giithû are largely shaped by this thwarted commercial development; and the sparse valleys and steep foothills of this area have been home to generations of migrants. In this small area, as a tactic of economic survival, migration may even be an optic through which to understand the historical construction of community.

Giithû is a valley community that has built a church, a school and a small market on the ridge between the Majiira and Acîampau rivers. Sponsored by the Consolata's Athwana mission, the large school saves hundreds of children hours of walking up to alternative schools in Irandirû or Ankamia. It is a remote place, accessible by only one road which passes through the Nyambene forest and its tea estates, before a precipitate descent past Irandirû onto the narrow ridge defined by the waters of the Majiira and Acîampau. Its people acknowledge the disadvantages of their distance from larger market centres and employment opportunities, but routinely walk many kilometres to engage in commercial or social interests.

A community formed through generations of migration, relocation and displacement is reflected in the individual biographies of its former or present residents. Within this rural community, migration in one form or another partially defined the kind of society the community had become. To demonstrate how migration became a critical part of the life-course process in generations coming of age after the 1940s, an examination of the linkages between migration, age-class formation and the construction of community is merited. According to the biographical sketches of Giithû residents, migration came to have a deep impact upon Giithû late into the colonial period, but has since then become an institutionalised factor of social life and economic livelihood.

Prior to the 1940s, Giithû was a territorial community with no remarkable link to migration. An aged Ithaliî, one of a few of this age-class still alive during fieldwork, mentioned in passing that Kiramunya and Ithaliî did not experience being called out to work as migrant labourers in the settler economy. This, he asserted, fell upon Mîcubu (*“Mîcûbû arîîtwa ngûgi”*, or ‘Mîcûbû were called out to work’). In the biography of this elder, he had been recruited into a dance troupe consisting of Kiramunya and Ithaliî which was sent to Nyeri where they performed *kwoutha* for a largely European audience. Instructed to wear loin-clothes (*tûtambaa*) to cover their genitalia, these *nthaka* danced for eight days before returning by foot to Tigania. In recompense for their entertainment (it was possibly the Royal Visit of Edward), all of the dancers were exempted from eight years of taxation. There are several possible explanations why Ithaliî had not gone out into the colonial workforce. The high mortality rates during the first decades of colonial rule had significantly depressed the population of youth, particularly of Kiramunya who had begun to marry in the early 1920s. In addition, the organisation of the colonial administration had not been consolidated, with

no district officers posted to Tigania and Igembe, making tax evasion relatively easy.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, the colonial government pledged the Empire combat troops from all across their rule in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. Throughout fieldwork, some fascinating accounts of how such colonial subjects were conscripted were encountered. The story of how two unwilling recruits of the Mîcûbû *ndinguri* grouping were traced back to Giithû and pressed into service speaks of migration's legacy. Having worked in the tea and coffee estates of Nairobi and Limuru, these Mîcûbû youth had been enumerated and their identities formalised through their *kîpande* issue, allowing them to work as employees on distant estate farms. The *kîpande* was a work and travel permit worn around the neck in a cannister, the colonial version of today's *kitambalisho* or identity card. Upon being called up, they returned quickly to Giithû, where they tried to escape the attentions of the colonial administration. Within a short time, they were traced back to Tigania, accosted by the government chief, before being delivered to the KAR recruitment officers. An earlier call for *laing'o baili* (two braves) from each location, soon became a systematised attempt to conscript from the roll of those issued *kîpande* (work permit and identification papers). A shift from using local categories of personhood to determine which individuals would be conscripted to using the state bureaucracy as a compelling force in recruiting soldiers mirrored the advanced desperation of the war by the early 1940s. The challenge of raising an East African colonial army from the sleepy, demographically robust, rural populations was partially curtailed by playing upon the martial values upheld by many indigenous communities. A second factor was the experiences of privation during the 1920s and 1930s, which was linked to the rounds of labour migration being organised on the outbreak of war. Global war and the emergent commercialism of Kenya's agrarian economy worked in tandem, turning an

army of workers into an army of soldiers.

With many Mîcûbû enrolled in state sponsored labour recruitment schemes, members of this age-class were away from Giithû for long periods of time. Those registered with the government labour recruitment schemes, found themselves either taking the train or walking to the tea and coffee estates around Nairobi. Others found themselves working on the commercial farms being established in Timau and Nanyuki. Thus, *gwîta ncomba* (to go to the coast) frequently referred to any labour migration outside of Meru. An early period of colonial labour policies worked on a system of conscription, or forced labour, which was known in Meru as *gwîta kîoro* (cf. Lonsdale 1995: 252). In later years, the familiar pattern of labour migration became known simply as *gûcwa ngûgi* (to look for work), implying an absence from home for undisclosed periods of time.

Giithû's extensive planting of coffee, most terraced into the steep hillsides, is associated with the Mîcûbû who migrated to Mwimbî in the 1940s as casual farm labourers. In recent years, as in Imenti, the decline of co-operative marketing societies' financial power has diminished coffee's status as a worthwhile cash crop, but past coffee revenue has paid the school fees of, at least, two generations of coffee farmers' children (cf. Lamont 1999). Having spent years working in Mwimbî, returning migrants brought coffee to plant in their small parcels of land, inherited upon the finalisation of marriage arrangements. According to the biographies and narratives collected with Giithû residents, most clans from Mwimbî had *gîcîaro* relations with their Giithû counterparts and, however diminished today, Mîcûbû labour migrants expressly evoked them on their sojourns to work in the small farms of Mwimbî in the 1940s. It was in this time, as well, that returning migrants brought back exogamous trees, like gravellia, to plant on their lands. With respect to the recent migration of

nthaka as small farm helps, in the early 1990s, there was an exodus of Gwantai to parts of Igembe requiring labour during the long *miraa* 'boom' of that decade. Upon their return in recent years to Giithû, most of these migrants planted *miraa* trees chosen from the plantations of *miraa* farmers in Igembe where they found work and accomodation. Such migrants, transform the landscape and the scale of commercial agriculture upon their return from working away from Giithû.

Migration even turned up as an element in the administration of persons accused of being anti-social, violent, or prone to serial theft. During fieldwork, a newly appointed sub-Chief, at a divisional level, acted upon an alarming trend of theft through rounding up the suspects, on the basis of their notoriety, before paying them the transportation costs to leave Giithû for good. This same sub-Chief, while tackling an outbreak of inter-personal violence, seized all 'slashers', modified double-edged machetes, before sending violent offenders either to jail or outside of his community. While banishment has been an ancient form of punishment, its present manifestation is woven into the organisation of the state's rural personnel, albeit through local idioms of jurisprudence.

At the local level, Giithû residency shifted again during the Mau Mau war, erupting during the youth of the Ratanya and their young wives, the Mûkabî. Even in the construction of the past, elders from Giithû spoke about *îgiita ya Thama*, a time of migration, from the root *kûthamia* (to relocate). I latterly learned this was during the Emergency (*majik* in Kîimenti⁴⁶). Several elders' spoke of *îgiita ya Thama* as a defensive decision of the community to disband their homesteads and rebuild upon the upper slopes of the valley walls. This was said to have been what all Giithû clans have

⁴⁶ Many of my elder Imenti informants, particularly men and women of Miriti-Mûcece and Kîruja-Nkoroî, declared that *majik* was the time when Meru social life was in rapid transformation, including the construction of novel social identities

done in the past when confronted by potentially hostile enemies: building from a vantage point, high up in the valley to spot enemies' incursions (*maitha*). This expression of Giithû elders' historicity, *îgiita ya Thama* - called *majik* by those experiencing it in central Imenti - jogs its witnesses back to times of insecurity and contingency. Outside of elders' narratives, the point was enlivened by stumbling across *maganjo*, or, the ruins of houses on the summits of some of the taller hills. Sometimes no more than the creozote from a long extinguished hearth or a cluster of unrecognisable detritus found in an exposed midden (*kîara*), their physical remains are testimony to a passed era still tenured in people's memories.

During *îgiita ya Thama*, Giithû elders spoke of constant excursions into the forest: in building a supply network with Mau Mau in the forests; preparing charcoal to sell at the kiosks and hotelis of Mikinduri; or else, safely drinking illicitly away from the path of the local *kaborio* (Government chief). It was a period of time where cutting down the wrong tree might mean being served a term in jail, but also a time when forests were logged in a growing commercialisation of timber. During the famine known locally as 'the firewood famine', *mpara ya kaunankû*, when Ratanya *ndinguri* were in formation, the forests surrounding the community were felled in a desperate attempt to make money and buy food. Timber merchants based in Mikinduri started to make their fortunes through transporting unmilled timber from central Tigania to bigger buyers based in Meru and Nairobi. Giithû, which means a small forest, is sparsely wooded today.

Wives remembered their husbands moved away completely from Giithû before *îgiita ya Thama*, but in the second and third years of the Emergency most local men experienced relocation. This was also experienced among families living above Giithû, communities which were collectively known as the *Mîciîmûkûrû* (old families), who

were removed from their lands and relocated in the marshy and wooded scrub at the fringe of the Imenti forest at Mbeû. While Giithû residents did not experience mass relocation, but there was a heightened degree of individual dispersion owing to the political tensions in the country. The social distress of the local insurgency is noted by male absence and a suppression of normal ceremonial activities. Young men who did not migrate during this crisis period, often resorted to guerrilla activities while evading summary arrest. If *îgiita ya Thama* is remembered for the community relocations in the early 1950s, it does so through a largely female perspective, those who were permitted to remain.

In one intimate description of a mother's and co-wife's experience of the period, she choose to highlight the economic struggle to feed children born prior to the explosion of animosities that was Mau Mau. Although movement outside of Meru was prevalent during this historical period among younger men, it is noteworthy that few women claim to have had children during the Emergency. Circumcisions and other ceremonies performed during this period appear to have been ill remembered or even forgotten. With Mau Mau guerrillas campaigning against British colonial troops from the depths of the Nyambene forest, the pattern of movement between different places separated the sexes, stalled ceremonial life, and engendered coming trends of marital and residential life.

The movement of young men has historically proven to be a challenge to the formation of age-classes in Meru. Besides the creation of an outstanding category of person in the *bûrukû*, the migrant labourer in Meru historical narratives is marked by their ambiguous position within the ageist and generationalist hierachies of the old polity. In the precolonial past, migration into Meru was frequent among refugees from other communities scattered by political conflict, drought, disease, or war. The Meru

age-classes allowed recent immigrants to become Meru within a single generation. In contrast, the outward direction of Meru migration during the colonial period and into the present has had the effect of 'Kenyanising' individuals as they encountered a public space outside of the Meru political imaginary. The colonial state had the remarkable challenge of balancing its own bureaucratic categories of subject, 'worker', 'migrant', 'Native', and so on, with those which existed in the life worlds of the people they dominated. It was through an exercise in sorting out entangled cultural categories that the colonial administration, in Meru, could conflate ideas which belonged properly to the Meru age-class and generational polity with their own needs for African labour in the growing agrarian economy. Only circumcised youth could be legally issued the necessary travel and work permits which allowed movement outside of the 'Native Reserve' and conscripted labour within it. Looking for work became synonymous with social maturity. As such, labour recruitment policies were shaped as much by indigenous notions of social maturity as such ideas about adulthood and maturity were shaped by the compulsions of labour recruitment, taxation, and conscription.

CHAPTER SIX

'Our *gaarû* is the School': education and youth

On a bright, dry and dusty day in September, 2002, Timothy Ntongai, a Lubeeta, told me and Kaunga, my minder, "I do like traditions, but I don't know alot of them because my circumcision sponsor (*mûgwatî*) had told me to forget about them and put more effort into school." This remark, from a man in his early sixties' who had been initiated around 1959, upset my earlier assumption that men of his age in Tigania had undergone initiations which were, as a form of life, not substantially much different from those which their parents had gone through. This was, in itself, not a cold display of my own naïvety, nor any penchant for 'tradition' in my imaginary, ethnocentric stance about what had 'really' happened in Meru history. Rather, I was surprised because I had already sat with dozens of similarly aged men and been convinced, through their story telling, that it was with the younger men and women coming of age in the 1970s and 1980s that concern about the 'breakdown of tradition' and advent of 'modernisation' had become the topic of local conversations.

I had, unintentionally, stumbled onto a meaningful debate which is located in views about 'white' and 'African' forms of education. Carolyn Hamilton's (1998) notion of how indigenous and colonial ideas become historically entangled could be applied to this Meru debate about education. When the lines of alterity between 'white' and 'African', or coloniser and colonised, are drawn around the ideas of education, the effect is to enter into some kind of polemic about the differences of material and moral rewards stemming from education. For all boys, the expectation of future employment hinges upon schooling, but this is also shored up by their

circumcision. For some, this meant that initiation and inclusion into an age-class, where an individual is taught how to behave as a moral person, was of major significance as a mode of learning. Others, however, deemed this mode of action irrelevant, stressing the 'duty' of attending schools in working towards 'developing' Meru and Kenya. The present chapter aims to contextualise the historical entanglements of indigenous and colonial ideas through a sociological discussion about the ways in which education and the formation of age-classes are mutually implicated.

Access to education continues to be a major public issue in Kenya and the teachers' union, the KNUT (Kenya National Union of Teachers), is the only trade union able to organise strikes and pressure government into making concessions. The payment of school fees is a constant worry for many parents. Although there are no direct fees for primary education, it is frequent for high school pupils to be periodically sent home for failure to keep up with school fee payments. Successive governments have attempted to introduce truancy laws to reinforce their commitments to mandatory primary education, but school attendance in the Nyambenes continues to be dogged by the availability of remunerative jobs for child labourers. NGOs working in the region have complained about the challenges posed to 'development' and education by what they view as 'traditional factors.' Locally, however, laws about mandatory educational requirements pose problems for the organisation of initiatory practices among both boys and girls. One of these problems is that the community comes to refashion its imaginary through the successive initiation of youngsters, but that this occurs at a time when their schooling is still ongoing.

The circumcision of children brings about a situation where the meanings, values and principles at stake in the formation of age-classes may be negotiated and

debated. *Rites de passage* do not only work to integrate individuals into a community and renew the particularity of social relations, but they also provide a context for the 'historical reappraisal' of circumstances which transcend the social, political, and economic construction of local society (Rigby 1983: 449). Put another way, as Veena Das (1995: 5-6) does, such initiations are 'critical events' within Meru, working to reconstruct the local political imaginary of 'the world', through the institutional changes experienced by different *nthukî*. Although Das certainly had in mind upheavals, especially unprecedented ones, in her discussion of 'critical events' in contemporary India, such as the Bhopal industrial disaster, I mean to tone down this concept to include institutionalised events which compel local Meru actors towards reappraising their ideas and practices about 'tradition' and 'modernity', the two leading motifs in this community of argument. That is not to exclude a wider definition of 'critical events' more in line with Das' original formulation of the concept. Meru's recent history has had disasters of its own which have had grave consequences for social identity and institutional organisation. One such event in 1990, centred around gender violence at the St.Kizito High School in Tigania, was so shocking to local morale that Anne-Marie Peatrik suggested that it signalled a crisis in Meru social life no less severe than those which rocked the Meru in the 1930s, when illness, famine, and poverty brought about a deepening malaise which is still remembered today (Peatrik 1999: 34-5). Yet, in Meru, because the initiation of boys and girls normally involves some measure of political lobbying, even struggle, it is reasonable to see the forms of argument which emerge in this context as ranging in intensity from Rigby's interpretation of ritual as an opportunity for historical reappraisal to Das' idea of the untimely and critical event as an acute reworking of insitutional life. It is important to note, however, that these reworkings and reappraisals are not limited to ceremonial or

symbolic life, but have their sociological impact in the institutional nexus of schools, hospitals, law enforcement, bureaucracy, and organised religion.

This chapter's aim is to trace the political and moral discourses which have their roots in different generations' experiences of institutional change, and into which may be inscribed schooling, changes in initiatory practices, as well as transformations in the categories of personhood based on gender and generation. Many decades ago, the formation of age-classes was reimagined alongside the growth of school and educational facilities following efforts to institute new colonial welfare schemes. The first mention of 'African' welfare as an imperial strategem of rule, covering the 'mind' and 'body' of the colonised, comes in the shadow of metropolitan debates about social welfare in the economic depressions of the 1930s (Lewis 2001: 1-21). What exactly was meant by 'African' welfare, however, was hotly disputed not only in the Colonial Office, but in the heart of the workers' and squatters' quarters, the towns, and the 'reserves' of colonial Kenya. In the institutions of mission or government funded schools, the space of age-class, initiation, and indigenous forms of knowledge came under critique from a variety of, mostly European, social actors. The school, as the primal symbol of this imperial welfarism, represented something other than the oppressive realities of colonialism. Under the tutelage of white teachers, black pupils would come to signify some of the deepest challenges to the essentialised idea of the 'conservative' African, as well as begin an incipient process of class formation in the 'reserves' (cf. Berman 1990: 226). Although white domination of school administration and organisation reified the untenable model of racist hierarchy which colonial Kenya desperately clung to, African challenges to European control over schooling began as early as the late 1920s, when the African Independent Schools and Church movements began to build momentum. Since these earlier decades, education

has been a controversial site of political contestations.

In relatively remote districts such as Meru, however, schooling was curtailed by colonial neglect and local footdragging. The school was also subject to attack in some of the more vitriolic anti-colonial sentiments. These attacks, however, came less from the 'conservative' Africans who were constantly and cynically lambasted in the colonial officers' reports. Rather, it was the former pupils themselves who rallied around anti-colonial sentiments and saw the potential for subverting the 'White man's rule' from within its educational arenas. Involving themselves in teaching, clerical work, and catechism, a number of young Meru men found themselves working within the new colonial political-economy in order to work out a new *modus vivendi* which could balance local structures of feeling with the modern forms of inequalities and opportunities. Although this past period is only remembered in fragments, descendants of early Meru élites suggest that it was the school and the church which permitted youth in the 1930s and 1940s, to begin with, to adopt styles of thinking, acting, and dressing which separated them dramatically from their older counterparts. Attending school was viewed as a political statement in these colonial contexts. Rather than destroy the Meru, as some of these arguments would claim, schooling became a context for debate and polemics which rendered formerly embedded anxieties visible to the public. One of these anxieties was the acknowledgment that initiation and age-class formation was an object of fascination and alterity for the 'white men', inclusive of both missionaries and colonial officers, and that their ideas about changing aspects of these modes of action were often forced upon the young. As Lynn Thomas (2003) has shown for the medicalisation of Meru bodies, in which the source of men's power over women's reproduction was linked to changes in female initiation and abortion, the politics of the institutionalisation of the Meru 'mind' has been equally gendered, as

will be explored in greater detail below.

As the experiences of cohorts who underwent schooling would demonstrate, however, the Meru continued to be formed as a community through the central space inhabited by the *nthukî*, albeit in an argumentative mode. Debate about the value of old practices and ideas were not so much geared towards abandoning them, but rather to force them into new moulds of reckoning and new definatory modes. To give *nthukî* its saliency in the entanglements of ideas which education fostered, they had to be relocated in 'the world', that is, rendered modern. As a young Imenti pointed out to me, when walking by a secondary school dormitory, 'Our *gaarû* is the School.'

In order to make further reconstructions of the Meru in transition, thereby highlighting the significant value of debate and 'historical reappraisal' which accompanies age-class formation, the changing perceptions of and participation in both education and Christianity provide further departures on the problem of historical entanglement and historical perspective. In the discussion of migration above (see Chapter Five), education was clearly linked to the spatial dispersion of a demographic cohort and the constraints this imposes upon age-class formation. The focus of this chapter will continue upon such analysis, but addresses more specific changes that some of the most recent *nthukî* have introduced. In particular, after a brief sketch of the history of missionary-sponsored schooling in Meru, this chapter asks why the socially demographic phenomenon of 'over-aging' has been less pronounced in age-class formation since the 1980s. It also addresses the contentious reworking of girls' initiations within the polemics of the earlier 'female circumcision controversy' of earlier generations and its more recent representation in the politics and poetics of campaigns against FGM (Female Genital Mutilation).

A brief history of schooling in Meru District (c. 1911 - 1991)

Education was viewed from afar in the early colonial period. According to informants over the age of sixty, attitudes towards formal schooling were largely negative before the mass enrollment of pupils in the early 1950s. These were drawn from the Lubeeta of Tigania and the Kîbaabu of Imenti. Colonial archives demonstrate a precipitate increase in the number of students attending what were then called 'out-schools', small classroom blocks built and maintained by missionary societies such as the Methodists and the Consolata Fathers. Near Mikinduri, an original timber schoolhouse built in 1939 by the United Methodist Missionary Society still stands on the grounds of Rware High School. This school had been supported by a government chief of the Ithaliî class, M'Itwariciû, who lobbied amongst the political leadership of the area to put their backing behind attempts to educate local boys. Itinerant District Officers, travelling by foot throughout Tigania and Igembe, also reported during this period that sections of the population were demanding access to schools for their children. Interestingly, however, these demands were couched in a sectarian struggle between Methodists and Catholics, each grouping describing the intentions to build a school too close to their own as a form of 'jealousy.' Regardless, people who experienced the 1950s strongly supported the building of educational facilities as the clamour for improved employment increased. Yet, this rather novel appetite for education had previously been resisted by youth and elders alike.

Elderly Tigania informants, especially those of the Mîcûbû-Mûkubu spousal class, began to send their male children to schools that had been opened in Mikinduri and Mûthaara. Earlier school enrollment had been limited to very few pupils. Originally built in 1923, the Catholic mission at Athwana housed a main school which

was attended by boys from a large catchment area. The European priests who taught there were called *batîrî*, a derivative from the Italian *padre*, or 'father.' When pressured by *kaborio* (Chiefs) to send their children to schools, especially after the field visitations of DOs, parents relinquished their opposition and allowed boys to attend the schools, although also instructing them not to divest 'secrets' to the *batîrî* and to return home as soon as possible. According to biographic statements, there were internal polemics about the motives of the Catholic fathers, including the lively creation of rumour that they were cannibals or slave traders. These foreigners were clearly perceived as a threat by some members of the communities in question. Unlike other 'outsiders', the *batîrî* made no attempt to marry into local clans, making them more 'other' than the Pashtun and Baluchi traders who settled in the new market centres of Mikinduri and Kianjai and who had eventually married local girls. Quite a number of informants, now mostly aged men of the Ratanya class, remember only partial school attendance. Others, in the minority, recalled being encouraged to engage in truancy, especially by older *nthaka* and their elder kinswomen. While passive resistance to education in central Tigania appeared to be widespread, there was also support for it, coming from persons who had been exposed to missionary activities, labour migration, and the development of commercial markets for agricultural goods. Certainly, those with linkages to the colonial administration through the offices and appointments of the *kaborio* were eager to have local children enrolled in schools. Although this generally parallels changing perceptions towards school-based education elsewhere in greater Meru, the general appropriation of education among the Tigania was less pronounced, and slower, than was the case for the Imenti who appropriated the school (*cukuru*) as a political implement to forge an ethnicised 'modern' identity (cf. Maupeu 1990).

In the Imenti section of Mĩiriga Mĩerũ, where the Methodists built their first main school at Kaaga, elders can still name the first Christianised pupils. This is largely because of an act of resistance that spelt tragedy for several of those in attendance. Latterly, these pupils became known as the *athomi* (from the verb *kũthoma*, to read). In 1911, some years after Kinyanyuri (the Reverend Worthington) began to proselytise among the Imenti, a trickle of male students, most of them uninitiated 'over-aged' *bwĩĩĩ*, started schooling in a curriculum which was highly vocational. Carpentry, and not necessarily catechism, was the main goal of this early education. Some among them, however, were taught to read and write English and Kiswahili. Their girlfriends, observing from a distance, would come to learn the 'Three Bs': Babies, Baths and Bibles. According to memory, quite a number of the boys came from among the poorer, recently migrant families said to be 'orphans' or *nkĩa* (clients), which had congregated in the vicinity of Fort Meru following the 'conquest' of 1908 and the establishment of a military garrison near Kaaga.⁴⁷ Among them was included M'Inoti who would become the Methodists' first African minister and a long standing government Chief and leader of the LNC, until his death in a road accident in the early 1950s, locally rumoured to be an assassination. During the turmoil surrounding the earlier formation of Miriti (c. 1913-14), an unidentified group of *nthaka*, probably of the age-class Kiramana, set fire to the dormitory where these pupils were sleeping, killing eight and burning several others. For those who escaped, their story became one of the principal narratives in the formation of an ethnic identity amongst the Imenti that was specifically Methodist (cf. Maupeu 1990).

An excerpt from an interview with Kĩrĩgũ, an aged Mũcece (wives to the Miriti) who was an early participant in the Methodist missionaries' activities in

⁴⁷ The present site of the police station in Meru Town was the early colonial government post of Fort Meru in 1911, which was latterly changed to Meru District, Kenia Province around 1914.

Miiriga Mîerû, provided a narrative context with which to interpret the local perceptions of European religiosity and its educational mission:

“Ibûetagite babaingî cukuru mma...Peter-o-M’Marûngo abataithîritue nyomba”

[There were quite a few going to school...Peter son of Marûngo was burned in the house]

“Nîuntû bwa kûthoma?”

[Because of schooling?]

“Îi...nîuntû bwa kûthoma baithîrua nyomba Kaaga...M’Ntimbû naîte mma, araringa dirica araumîra nao, araya ûû kîongo mma”

[Oh yes... because of schooling they were burned in the house at Kaaga...M’Ntimbû was there and burnt badly on his head, but he struggled to escape through a window]

“Abakîrî ka-a...nî nthaka cîaîthithie?”

[Who was responsible? Was it the warriors who did it?]

“Tî nthaka cîaîthithie nîuntû bagwîita kwenjwa mîgara ûtiuntû ‘Kwenjwa mîgara ûtiuntû nî ûthaka bwa mîceni! Kwenjwa mîgara ûtiuntû nî ûthaka bwa mîceni!’...Nîuntû tûtiendaa kwona ûntû beenji mîgara...na kangî, mûntû akua îî bakarinda. Nûkwigua?”

[It was warriors who did it, because the students went to be shaved with meaningless haircuts, (we would sing) Meaningless haircuts are nothing but the warriorhood of the missionaries! Meaningless haircuts are nothing but the warriorhood of the missionaries!’... because we didn’t appreciate to see shaved scalps... and there was more, when someone died they were buried. D’you hear?]

European clothing and haircuts were more than superficial contrasts to the aesthetic ideals of warriorhood espoused by the Kiramana. They were outwardly threatening signs of contest with the Kiramana, because the missionary pupils had rejected warriorhood (*ûthaka*) and stood, effectively, on the margins of the indigenous polity. It is not too difficult to imagine how the warriors would have seen a raid upon the school as an opportunity to prove themselves. This would have been an expected course of action. It was this grouping who, among other things, had experienced the colonial conquest as boys and had been prohibited from engaging in activities associated with their martial ideals (Fadiman 1993). The arson had been partially

brought on by Worthington's own interference with the circumcision ceremonies that his pupils were expected to participate in. His nickname, Kinyanyuri, meaning 'behind the house' was earned by his reputation for spying on local circumcision events. On the matter of circumcision among his pupils, Worthington was accused by the DC of being too 'highly minded' and a proportion of the blame for the arson seems to have been spirited in his direction. However, instead of terrorising the *athomi* into acquiescence, the *nthaka* inadvertently created a social opposition to 'tradition' which would latterly express itself in the formation of an Imenti political élite. New and disturbing innovations were introduced to the Imenti Meru during this early colonial period. Kîrîgû's mention of the the burial of the dead, for instance, signalled not only a rupture from expected mortuary practices, but also a radical departure from the moral and spiritual restrictions of contemporary social life. The 'warriorhood of the mission' would be the social crucible for the construction of literacy, petty capital accumulation, and access to the resources of the imposed polity: the colonial state. The *ûthaka bwa mîceni* (warriorhood of the mission), as this elderly informant put it, was also the emergence of a hybrid form of historical consciousness. As demonstrated by the first locals to turn to the Methodist Church in the 1930s, known as the Trail Blazers or the *Atemibanjîra* in Kîmerû, evangelical Christianity offered those persons excluded from the formation age-classes an alternative organisation which also promoted the use of age categories, specifically church 'youth' and church 'elders.' Within a single generation's youth, that overlapping the formation of the Miriti-Mûcece and Kîruja-Nkoroi, the churches and their schools became, in some ways, a refuge of the excluded and disenfranchised. Today, to some degree, the opposite case prevails where those most active in the formation of age-classes are excluded, to some degree, from modern forms of sociality and economy.

Nevertheless, this transitional Christian cohort remained a minority within the larger social formation until they were to become parents in the 1940s. As such, their reputed appropriation of 'modernity', most significantly marked by their ambition to educate their children, would continue to be the subject of internal social debate. Despite the increasing enrollment of children in schools, whether those of the mission societies or the Independent Church movements, the effects of education upon social identity and economic activities were constrained by its on-going association with the unreasonable extension of childhood.

Even among younger persons, those of Mbaya and Kîbaabu whose age-classes were in formation throughout the 1950s and 1960s, biographies revealed a sense of embarrassment about continuing education after having been circumcised. Mburugu, a Kîbaabu and now a primary school teacher, recalled being teased by *nthaka* who felt that his school-leaving certificate was evidence of an extended childhood. Another man of this age-class said that he left school early, despite the availability of money for schools fees and uniforms, because he was convinced that sitting indoors amongst children was inferior to the freedoms he could enjoy "messaging about" with his age-mates. Such freedoms included working as a *shamba-boy* or having girlfriends. From the comparison of several biographies created with this age cohort, the Kîbaabu, sacrificing the ideal of freedoms and mobility enjoyed in the company of *nthaka* was not a highly esteemed alternative. The idea of being suspended in childhood and alienated from one's peers provoked anxiety among many youth in the 1950s. Among a relatively large segment of Meru's young population in the late 1950s, the ideals of *ûthaka* had been maintained much as they had been at the time of the Kaaga arson, despite radical transformations in the political-economy and a gradual elevation in the value of schooling.

Even during 2001-2003, however, some educated persons were belittled by those who have not followed the full course of their schooling. A university graduate had his degree certificate stolen and thrown into a pit latrine as punishment for a purported act of 'having airs.' The suspected culprits were his age-mates. As I followed this particular incident quite closely, I was struck by this individual's sense of betrayal, confused as he was between having been (in his view) unfairly treated by his "friends" but also deeply threatened by the loss of a document which he valued highly and equated with getting a reasonable job. Unemployed and unable to raise money to replace it, the idea of having wasted years of studying and being ridiculed for it by his age-mates was painful.

In the past, education was viewed by many as something only suitable for children and, critically, only boys of Christian families. It is reasonable to ask, based on the association of schooling with an extended childhood, how and under what historical circumstances and consciousness schooling became widely available to boys and, latterly, a large number of girls. While the last section of this chapter deals specifically with the position of girls with respect to age-class, or in their case, spousal-class formation, the following arguments further explore how education and schooling eventually became factors in the transition of Meru age-class formation over a period spanning three age-classes, or about a generation.

Age-class formation permits the opening up of opportunities or arenas for social debate and the construction of historical reappraisals. In the next section, still following the significance of education to Meru age-class and generational formation, the theme of 'over-aging' as a problem for social organisation is explored. More specifically, however, the section exposes the crises within the formation of age-classes in Tigania for the years 1959-1991. This period is inclusive of a generation

spread out between Lubeeta (1959-1969), Miriti (1973-1981), and Gwantai (1983-1991). All of these Tigania age-classes received intensified and expanded exposure to primary and secondary levels of schooling and, in their transitional mode, significantly altered the principles through which age-classes are formed and recognised as such. For this discussion the Imenti case is momentarily suspended, chiefly because the failure of another age-class to emerge after 1979 is suggestive that 'over-aging' - and its opposite of 'under-aging' - have become irrelevant in recent decades following a refusal to form age-classes through strict interpretations of any principles based on timing and segregating the generations' memberships into adjacent age-classes (cf. Hazel 2001). As the ethnographic context is revealed, *ad hoc* amendments to rules, principles and ideals guiding age-class formation are recognised in the form of 'mixing', a hybrid category of thought and action which is derived from the historical conditions of the postcolony.

No more additions!: mitigating the problem of 'over-aging' in the 1970s

Two related problems, those of 'over-' and 'under-' aging, threaten the overall organisation and continuity of age-class and generational formations. Simply put, one is 'over-aged' for recruitment into an age-class when exceeding the normative 'proper' age for initiation. This is reckoned statistically by one's father's structural position within the system of timing and segregating generations (cf. Hazel 2001). As such, the 'proper' age is bound by a rule which should state that one is *x* number of age-classes removed from one's father (Peatrik 1995a). In Meru, this is further bound by the statement that no *ntaanĩ* may be initiated into a proximate age-class to his father's, but into one that is at least preceded by an intermediate class. Likewise, one is 'under-

aged' when statistically much younger than the average age of others recruited into a specific age-class. In a system with a generational principle, like that of the Meru, 'over-' and 'under-' aging are articulated through the structural positionality of classes of 'fathers' and 'sons', such that; one is never in the age-class adjacent to one's own father's, meaning that one could be very significantly more advanced in years than one's social age-mates. Again, put schematically, if one's father is compelled to wait for initiation until he is advanced in years, beyond the age of those he must call his social peers, even if they are chronologically much younger, in all likelihood, he will marry and have children when an older man. Consequentially, his sons' positionality will also drift from the statistical norm of one's 'proper' age. This 'proper' age is in all cases an ideal consistent with other constructions of the life-course. In Peatrik's (1999) incisive analysis of what she identified as demographic drift (*la dérive démographique*) among the generations, the problem is stated:

In effect, the local classification of generations are carriers of a demographic drift which may rapidly become unworkable. The men of a class *A* do not father children at the same time; their sons of a class *B*, therefore, will be of heterogenous ages, and their grandchildren of a class *C* will be even more so. If nothing in the course of time comes to contain the widening age span within a set and the straddling of the generations, it is not possible to see how these classes would be able to concretely organise their power among themselves (*translation mine*, Peatrik 1999: 16).

In this respect, 'proper' age is always something of a constant problem which requires periodical *ad hoc* resolutions. Sociologically, people must learn to articulate all the rules, principles and ideals into bounded temporal limits and strive to avoid situations of 'demographic drift' which create persons who are, in effect, excluded from inclusion into an age-class by their structurally late or early initiations. With a frequency left to be discerned, certain persons' position in the life-course will be disarticulated with

their chronological age and, in extraordinary situations, their generational position vis-à-vis their father. In an earlier chapter, the examples of categories such as *mwongela* (Tigania) and *nangitĩa* (Imenti) are representative of instances where demographic drift may be patched up, although the substitution of such categories do not eliminate the irreconcilable tensions between age and generation as principles of social organisation. This problematic part of the system only tangentially effects spousal-classes, because these are in formation long after an age-class and its smaller concomitant circumcision-classes have closed their recruitment.



Plate 11: An 'under-aged' Igembe youth and his uninitiated contemporaries (the latter wear school uniforms) (Muringene, 2001)

According to biographic field materials, by the early 1960s, it was becoming increasingly difficult to negotiate *ad hoc* solutions to organisational problems. More and more children were being born, instigating a severe demographic drift in the organisation and formation of age-classes. The numbers of those needing to be added

retrospectively to their 'proper' *nthukî*, the category of *mwongela*, was rumoured to expand alongside the enormous growth of the population. In the opinion of some informants, it became more difficult to know where any particular initiate *should* be positioned. This was more acute in cases where the initiate's father had also relied upon some *ad hoc* practice to position himself; or if the initiate's mother was the second wife of a polygynous father. The prior expansion in the numbers of individuals falling outside the threshold of the generational system, among whom the *bûrukû* were representative, led to a situation where the political authority vested in the elders became sharply fragmented. Because their power was not distributional, but the product of lobby and agitation, the fragmentation of *nthukî*-based solidarity and reciprocity shrank and divided the political arena.

The Ratanya, for instance, were the first *nthukî* not to follow through with the appointment of a *mûkîama* and did not perform the rites of cohesion between the major sections, or moieties, which transected Tigania and Igembe. This generalised trend towards a reorientation of the social system towards new circumstances of change was exacerbated by four primary adaptations of Ratanya. Firstly, they were a demographically large grouping who had turned to small economic-based trading associations, like the coffee marketing cooperatives, to maximise the commercialisation of Meru agriculture. Secondly, they rejected a great deal of the rules and principles constraining the generational system, extending their procreative period to encroach upon that of their eldest children. Thirdly, they advocated polygyny among its members and began to marry outside of the proscriptive marriage categories, sometimes marrying much younger women who would have, in former times, been unmarriageable and subject to certain incest-based prohibition. Fourthly, they refused to maintain and encourage their sons' age-class formation because, with time, this would

signal their enforced 'retirement' as a group of 'owners' (*eene*) holding on to rights through property and persons. A likely combination of all these factors produced a severe problem of over-aging amongst their 'sons' when the future Miriti (preceded by Lubeeta) were in formation during the early 1970s.

In truth, many of the 'over-aged' Miriti were not sons of the Ratanya alone. Biographic enquiries demonstrated that many of these were the offspring of Mîcûbû or *bûrukû*. Some could not even identify their father's age-class at all! Clearly, Miriti appeared to be a heterogeneous grouping, from which extreme examples of demographic drift could be picked. Yet, from its proponents, Miriti was partially formed by a commitment to reinstating the order of the age-class system which they perceived had been unworked by their 'fathers', here being represented by the Ratanya. From the vantage of fieldwork during 2001-2003, it appeared that the actions of the Miriti, in contrast to their fathers', may have partially conserved the authority within the generational system. First of all, the Miriti had agitated for their formation, winning the gradual approval of three senior *nthukî*. Secondly, the Miriti reorganised the scheduling, or calendar, through which the timing of circumcision classes and ceremonies could be commensurate with the priorities of education and formal schooling. This innovation of using the school calendar to organise the timing of circumcisions was the key that unlocked some of the contradictions of demographic drift and, simultaneously, mitigated the effects of 'over-aging' upon future age-class formation. It achieved this largely through elevating the value of age-based principles of recruitment more in step with the project of schooling which youth were then engaged in *en masse*. Its cost was, perhaps, an abandonment of generational principles which timed and segregated the period ideally given to couples to have their children, creating a partial overlap in the fertility of successive spousal-classes. The elevated

rôle given to the educational calendar meant shorter, more predictable cycles between circumcision classes and the innovative elimination of waiting, through postponement periods, outside of the likelihood of famine or another natural disaster.

In the 1970s, completion of the KJCE (Kenyan Junior Certificate of Education) became the cue for anticipating circumcision and the ceremonies associated with it. Yet, how did a set of examinations become an indicator for coming of age? And, why did this occur in the 1970s? Like most of their forebears, the age-class that was then in social formation, the Miriti, had agitated for its opening. Miriti *ndinguri* were initiated in the dry season of *thaano* in 1973. This coincided with a famine known locally in central Tigrania as *kîmwe* or *kîmûûa* ('the porridge famine') after the government provision of food relief similar to that which had been effected before. Because the *kabeeria* of Lubeeta were struck by a particularly devastating famine in 1969, the infamous *kîmûtû* ('the flour famine'), many of these latter had had their initiations postponed and, compromising their adherence to *gîîba*, decided to be initiated as a Miriti *ndinguri*. Among them could be counted a large number of 'over' aged fellows.

One of this large group, a school teacher from Giithû, claimed that while he was 'under' aged at the actual circumcisions, he knew of many contemporary youngsters who were sporting beards and considered aged beyond their status as *bwîî* (uncircumcised lads). These may have been the sons of the Mîcûbû or *bûrukû*, indicating a kind of generational 'slip mechanism' mentioned by ethnographers like Gulliver (1953) and Lamphear (1989).⁴⁸ Another Miriti, from Amatû, explained to me that there were many aged Miriti, some of them now in their fifties and today

⁴⁸ As an indication of their possible age, some of the sons of a Mîcûbû or *bûrukû* may have been as old as thirty to thirty-five years old when circumcised in 1973. In Kenya's political-economy of the 1970s, it is unfathomable that such men would not have already had children by the time they were eventually circumcised and initiated into an age-class.

circumcising their elder sons. At the same time, there are relatively fewer of the opposite cases where young men in their early thirties may be judged to have been 'under' aged. As yet another joked, "There are Miriti who are themselves just having small babies, while there are others being called Grandpa by a biggish lad." Certainly among my informants, I had met Miriti who would have been my own father's age, in their late fifties', while one or two were a little younger than myself, a categorically fictive Gwantai in his late twenties'. Likewise, I was astounded by the statement: "There are some Gwantai older than Miriti." These turned out not to be categorically 'over-aged' Gwantai and 'under-aged' Miriti, but rather variations of the theme of *bûrukû*. In a very clear sense, someone like myself could easily have been categorised as *bûrukû*, although I consciously distanced myself from this interpellation. I was intrigued, during fieldwork, to find that biographical examples of the 'over-' or 'under-' aged among the Gwantai were almost nil. It provoked the question as to whether, or not, something had changed in the ways that age-classes are formed.

The incorporation of educational calendars into age-class formation

One of the main reasons why there are relatively fewer 'over-aged' persons today is due to the timing of circumcision events during the school holidays. The history of the early 1990s, when Gwantai *kabeeria* were initiated, is linked to a structural transformation in age-class formation. That modification to the existant rules and regulations of *nthukî* was the semi-annual circumcision of *ntaanî* during April and December school closures. Twice each year, school holidays are made to co-incide with the very personal, but perfunctory circumcision of boys. A primary rule is outstanding: no boy should pass into secondary school or work-life without being cut.

Perhaps more fundamental is the construction of uncircumcised 'lads' as children and, hence, the lifting of sexual prohibition with initiation and the life-passage from old child to young adult. While many Gwantai exerted pressure to become initiated, especially *ndinguri* which opened in 1983, no anterior class of social actors has agitated for their formation and recognition. The majority of youths circumcised since 1991 are reportedly still unnamed as a class, although they may be referred to and understood as Gîcungî.

With political efforts to make education affordable, such as NGO child sponsorship programmes, more and more Nyambene children were able to enroll in primary schools. NGOs such as Save the Children Fund, paid portions of children's primary school fees for a relatively modest number of families. They eventually relocated from Nyambene in 2002. For decades, Nyambene primary schools had a reputation for low enrollment. In the 1990s, this was linked to the incentives for children to leave school to earn a living. Within the 'cash-only' *miraa* driven economy of many parts of Igembe, NGOs persisted in raising enough funds to send a larger proportion of children to school. In Tigania, with no equivalent commercial boom to exploit, large numbers of children sought a socially legitimate way of leaving school: such as to speak of their intention to be initiated. By the act of circumcision, boys access the individual freedom to participate in the remunerative economy. One pattern of movement for *nthaka* initiated during the early 1990s was, in Tigania, to migrate to Igembe and find work in the spin-offs of the *miraa* boom. Poor school attendance in Nyambene was blamed on 'harmful cultural practices', a criticism especially prevalent in the political views of the media, the NGOs, the provincial administration, the church and the teachers. Slightly earlier, the reputed 'backwardness' of Nyambene communities was rendered into a nation-wide stereotype, in which interpersonal

violence was underscored as symptomatic. Amidst larger nation-wide rumours of satanism among students, evidence of a serious crisis in local moralities hit a nadir with the violent rapes and murders of seventeen girls attending St. Kizito's Secondary in 1990. As a kind of 'critical event', St. Kizito heralded a period of increased government and NGO activity which put Meru on the national stage as a district where inter-personal and gender violence, illiteracy, drug and alcohol problems, and 'female genital mutilation' were rife (cf. Steeves 1997). Part of the response of Kenya's nascent and assertive civil society was to call for intervention within the Nyambene Range communities. Following the tragedy at St. Kizito's, a flurry of NGO activity led to the establishment of PAR (participatory action research) projects, whose mandate was to highlight the impact civic education and higher enrollment of primary school age children could have on curbing a perceived wave of violent crimes and 'backwards' practices. New voices began to be heard calling for further action against girls' clitoridectomies, interpersonal violence, and the precocity of school leavers. On a medical front, the dangers of male and female initiations were newly discussed within a paradigm of risk upon the body which emphasised the threat of hepatitis and HIV infection through group ceremonies.

Elsewhere, attitudes towards ceremonial practices gave away to political pressure from within the community leadership. Children in Imenti during this time were not told they were *kĩroge* ('penknives' or scalpels) if they were circumcised by a nurse under local anaesthesia. By 1998-9 the *njuri nceke* based around the municipality of Meru Town were unanimous in their opposition to initiating young girls, enforcing a ban which was in effect since 1956. Unprecedented, however, was that the *njuri nceke* sidestepped the normal threats to bring parents who initiated their daughters in front of the courts, following KANU's public announcement of a national

ban upon the practice. Instead, they announced an 'occult' sanction upon the parents of girls undergoing the rite. Previous to this alarming decision, the *njuri nceke* had lent support to state-led punishments, such as fines or even jail sentences, as well as backing the churches' commitment to excommunication. With the ambivalence of the provincial administration towards such 'customary' affairs noted, the proliferation of break-away pentecostal churches during the 1990s further eroded the punitive threat of excommunication for offending church members. One could, after all, easily join a church on the Christian fringe. New, more acute preventions had to be invented. In time, the *njuri nceke* made an astonishing mandate around the original 1956 prohibition. The punishment was to be outrightly cursed (*kûlaana* or *kîruume*).

In this context of shifting perceptions, debate about the appropriateness of traditional practices was rekindled. A Catholic priest living in Ruiri, on the dry borderlands of Imenti and Tigania, publically condemned in a local newspaper the public hazing and forcible circumcision of aged *bwîjî*. In Tigania, the behaviour of initiates during their ceremonies, *kwoutha*, was questioned by some on the basis of their decency. Christians asked themselves whether the 'burning ceremony', meeting around the masquerade of *ntûnkûri*, a characterised creature with a tail, was not in itself a sinister gathering. One of my research assistants, a Gwantai *ndinguri* himself, remembered feeling revolted watching a *mûthaka* who - while dancing the circumcision *kwoutha* ceremony - hoisted the bloodied underpants of a menstrating woman up into the air with a spear. Another, he claimed, had elongated his penis with hooks and weights during dances, provoking an uproar. Soon, the reputation of violence and vulgarity earned by some Gwantai, led to a lack of enthusiasm and support for their initiatory celebrations.

The formation of the Gwantai, from around 1983 to 1991, was profoundly

affected by the new context of debate about 'custom' and 'tradition' in terms of initiation's relation to other facets of social and institutional life. According to most Gwantai themselves, they had all gathered into groups of would-be initiates during one or another school break to go outside their location and perform *kûrîria*, the preparations preceded group circumcisions where initiates would lobby among their kinsmen and neighbours for material support and moral blessings. The exception was, however, those initiated from 1991, commonly referred to as the Gwantai *kabeeria*. Explanations of *kûrîria* differ significantly according to the age and social positionality of male informants. Most, however, would agree that it entails that the hopeful initiate publically announce his intentions to be circumcised (*kûromba njîra gûtaanwa*). This public announcement was often made to one's *mûntûetû* (mother's brother), from whom a young lad could *kûromba njîra* (ask for blessings) and get social approval for his anticipated circumcision. He always did this in the company of his future *wacîa* - those one is circumcised with - who accompanied one another to the houses of all of their mothers' brothers, away from their own clan (*mwîriiga*) and neighbourhood (*ntûûra*), and thus into the realm of the intra-clan public. Yet, the last Gwantai circumcision set to effect this movement was the *kobia*, initiated in 1988, and informants suggested to me that *kûrîria* has not been practiced since. Since around 1991, one had to ask for blessings (*kûromba njîra*) through other means.

As suggested above, school calendars seem to have scheduled circumcisions for a decade, roughly between the years 1991-2003. As I observed among the Imenti (1998, 2001) and the Tigania (2002), most school going lads anticipate being circumcised and initiated into young adult life on the completion of their KCPE (Kenya Primary Certificate of Education) examinations. This is nominally at the end of eight years of primary level schooling. There is, however, the exception of young

men who could not arrange to be sponsored, either due to poverty or social alienation. The case of older boys lacking the necessary sponsorship for circumcision at a younger age is particularly prevalent amongst the '*shamba* boys', the ill paid full-time employees of prosperous farmers or land-owners. Quite a number of these boys who work in Imenti households and farms hail from Tigania. It is not unusual to find a nineteen year old '*shamba* boy' remaining uninitiated while working, say, on the farm of an employer who has recently circumcised his own boy, a primary school leaver, at the age of thirteen. Poverty and the absence of support, either in food provision or social instruction, still contribute to 'over' aging, but the majority of prospective *ntaanî* are legally 'school children', whose entry into a new phase of their life-course is scheduled by the closing of the school session. Thus, in Meru, passage through the closing, final exams and the receipt of the school leaving certificate is grafted symbolically onto the more poignant *rite de passage* - one's circumcision and seclusion - leading towards one's social re-absorption as an adult.

What is the social implication of continuous, semi-annual circumcisions upon the formation of age-classes? As seen with the category of *bûrukû* - a circumcised youth without either *îtaana* or *nthukî* - the recent abandonment of *kûrîria* has introduced new means through which to organise circumcisions, but no social arena has been subsequently re-defined for the formation of age-classes. Biographies from Miriti testify to their ongoing lobbying and exertion of social pressure from 1973 to 1981 in forming their *mataana* while their class contained a significant number of 'over' aged persons. With the abandonment of *kûrîria*, the ritual process separating initiation periods within a single age-class, the establishment of *mataana* no longer retained its logic of linking initiates together, while soliciting additional intra-clan support for the ceremonies. Although Gwantai informants claimed that both *ndinguri* and *kobia* had

agitated for their initiation and creatively manipulated the public to recognise them, their particular style of forming their class was widely disregarded as unruly and perhaps irreverent towards the style of their 'daylight fathers', the *beethe ba mûthenya* of Miriti, who were seen as Gwantai's social fathers (*baîthe*) and sponsors (*agwati*). As had previously occurred between the Kiramunya and Ithaliî in the early 1940s, when these *nthukî* had conflicted over issues of sponsorship and the reciprocity which went along with this social relation, the Gwantai were widely perceived as having alienated their 'daylight fathers' and soon earned a reputation for being vulgar and contrary. Many of the Gwantai's mother's brothers would have been Miriti and from 1991 onwards there is anecdotal evidence of a growing consciousness about the disruptive force of large-scale, calendrical circumcisions. Parents, in their turn, sought alternative ways to circumcise their 'sons', including the partial acceptance of solitary circumcision, meaning that a boy is cut alone. In such cases, the focus of the boy's initiation is often no larger a matter than a household or neighbourhood.

In Imenti, the terms *kûrîria* and *îtaana* are almost unknown, but during school holidays, especially the December break, thousands of local boys are in seclusion, closeted away in recently constructed houses. There they will stay for about a month, recovering from their operations while receiving social instruction from older *nthaka* who hail from their own neighbourhood. Sometimes an initiate may move to his *mûntûetû* should his maternal uncle be supporting his own son's initiation. Circumcision has become, in some cases, personalised and directed from the organisation of the family system. A fear of hazing, in particular, has led some parents to organise a son's circumcision themselves and offer their support of food provision, the circumcisor's fee and the maintenance of an appointed sponsor (*mûgwati*) for an

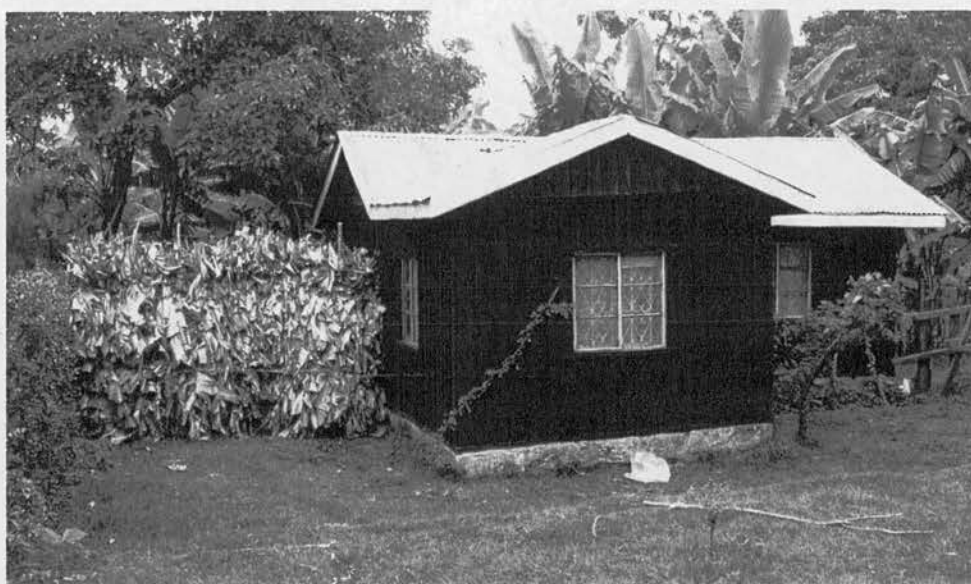


Plate 12: Extension made to a house for an initiate, Imenti (2002)



Plate 13: 'Traditional' circumcisor and elder (*mûtaanî*), Kangeta (2002)

entire month. For some families, the circumcision of a son or sons proves to be a stressful, financial burden, however necessary it is for the reproduction of their family and neighbourhood as social entities. Siblings and cousins of roughly the same ages are frequently circumcised and initiated together, because the expenses involved in a boy's initiation are considerable.

The initiation of girls is one of the most politicised elements within Meru as a community of argument with a lengthy precedence of former controversies. In the next section, I examine how the female Meru 'body' has been institutionalised along with the 'mind' through specific attempts on the behalf of NGOs to educate the public about the 'dangers of FGM.' While obviously written from my perspective and position as a young man, this section aims to contribute to the already existent literature on this controversy in Meru (Chege 1993; Thomas 2003, 1998, 1996; Peatrik 1999). The contribution to earlier arguments, however, lies in an interpretation of the specific entanglements of ideas about girls' initiations as linked to ideas about education, development, and the imagined future of age-class and spousal-class formation.

Cutting words: NGO education against female excision in the 1990s

Little mention has been made about the positionality of girls' and young women's inclusion, or exclusion, within the age-class and generational 'system.' Does the hidden, but hardly defunct practice of clitoridectomy (*gûtaanithua nkenye*) engender a more impassioned social debate and historical reappraisal about modernity? More specifically, this section seeks to illustrate how the ban on female clitoridectomy - in effect since 1956 - has periodically been used to portray the

Nyambene Meru as 'backwards' in the context of social development. Indeed, country-wide (mis)representations of some Kimeru-speaking communities as atavistic, strongly vocalised in the daily newspapers, have served the interests of some proponents of Kenya's 'modernity', which is defined by a wealthy, Christian political élite who have affinities not only with government, but within civil society and, in particular, with the non-governmental organisations sector.

During the late 1980s and 1990s, NGOs increased their presence and programmes in the Nyambenes, many of which made their object the modernisation of the communities they targeted. Such programmes rested heavily upon a facile opposition of 'tradition' and 'modernisation', as well as resting upon a series of assumptions about how poor, rural Kenyan communities remained 'captured' by their 'culture.' Although HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns, family planning clinics, and anti-child labour activism have been prominent platforms for NGO educational programmes and interventions, none have been as emotive and provocative as the FGM ('female genital mutilation') sensitivity campaigns. During fieldwork, none of my informants actively supported female initiations, at least those through clitoridectomy, but quite a number also withdrew their support from the outside bodies which ran campaigns designed to 'eradicate FGM.' Although people casually wore t-shirts sporting the slogan, *Tiga gûtaanîro aarî* (Stop cutting girls), such high profile campaigns, financed by the Family Planning Association of Kenya (FPAK) seemed determined to engineer social change. An unintended consequence of such programmes was to press girls' initiatory clitoridectomies underground. As time went on, I began to question whether such NGOs had overstepped the boundaries of 'development' activity and whether they had organised a campaign of symbolic violence against some of the most marginal and 'traditional' factions of the

community. As I began to appreciate how the continued initiation of girls through clitoridectomy was implicated in coping with marginalisation and the new inequalities of the modern economy, I began to ask why the bodies of girls became the most emotively charged and argued about aspect of Meru political discourse. Did entrenched, highly funded and politically supported attacks on 'female genital mutilation' inadvertently recreate the social inequalities which lie behind the initiation of girls by clitoridectomy? How responsible were NGOs for the emergence of a strong counter-ethics of silence and secrecy?

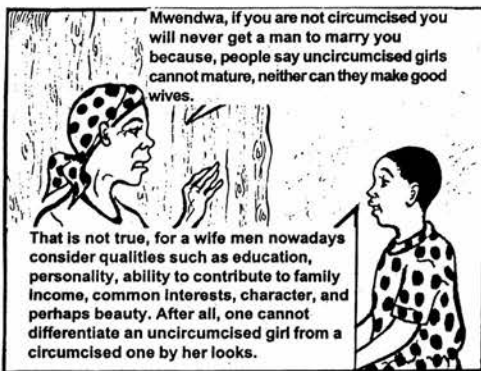
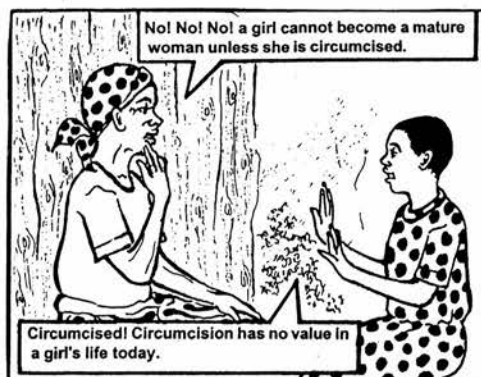
A broadly researched historiography of the controversies centering on clitoridectomy and its relation to efforts to eradicate abortion in colonial Meru has been written by Lynn Thomas (1996: 338-63; 1998: 121-45; 2003). The post-colonial period remains relatively unexplored, although of significance to analyses of the transcontinuity in Meru social history (cf. Chege 1993). In advocating liberal and medically informed interpretations of the young and old body, organisations which sought to educate the public about the dangers of clitoridectomy (and circumcision by extension) recycled the colonial categories of 'youth' and 'elders' to effectively divide the intersubjectivity of the generations. In this construct, elders were represented as conservative and resistant to change, whereas youth were portrayed as the 'righteous' agents of social and moral transformations. Interventions aimed at stemming clitoridectomies in Nyambene during the 1990s played upon deeply historical constructions of the innocent, nubile girl and the profiteering, menopausal crone. The wicked father and the ignorant brother completed the scene of the 'primitive' family. These were favourite caricatures of the liberal colonial imagination, itself propped up by fantasies of 'saving' the African and determining the method of their redemption.

Consider the pamphlet which came upon the scene in 1997, printed by FPAK

and Plan International, entitled, 'Today's Girl: The Times are Changing' (originally 'Today's Girl: *Badilika na Wakati*). Published in English, this pamphlet outlines a line of argument taken by an Igembe girl, Mwendwa, as she argues with her grandmother, a male cousin, and her older sister why she should have a choice on whether she submits to clitoridectomy or not. In the introduction, the question of historicity is raised up a notch in its rhetoric by FPAK's programme officer, Charity Kinya Koronya Mailutha:

In the old days many societies in Kenya had several traditions and practices which had a lot of meaning that time. These included Female Circumcision, Ear piercing, Tattooing, removing or sharpening of teeth, wearing of ornaments and skin clothes, and elaborate hair styles among many others. With the advent of modern education, many of these practices have changed due to changed life styles resulting from Christianity, formal education, etc. As we move into a new millenium, we realise that the African women, men, boys and girls are very different from their fore fathers two generations down the line. We are therefore faced with the challenges of modernization as we enjoy the new comforts and personal rights which the new times brings forth. Unfortunately cultural 'inertia' has not allowed us to move wholly into the modern times. In some areas, the persistence of old rites and practices such as female circumcision deny girls and women their basic rights and freedom. A today's girl has to cut this 'cultural - umbilical cord' to realise her full potential. In addition, the today's girl has every right to say NO to any act that will humiliate, dehumanise, injure her health and curtail her future progress as female circumcision does. Join in the story of Mwendwa, one such girl, who says NO to female circumcision. WELCOME (FPAK 1997: ii)

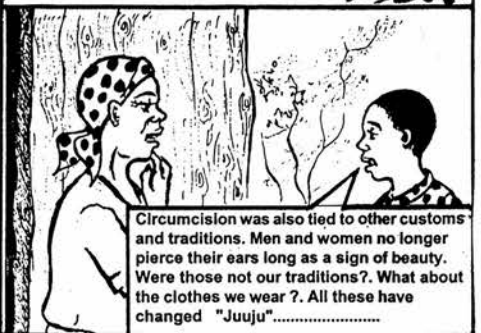
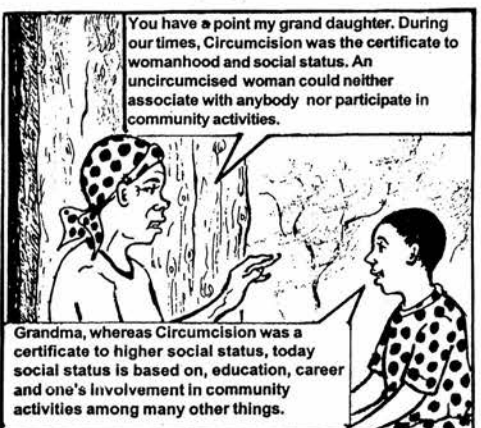
This passage's rhetoric is thick with tropes which are associated with the 'breakdown of tradition' and 'modernisation' narrative at the centre of Meru as a community of argument. Far from being the isolated rhetoric of the Family Planning Association of Kenya, the tropes of 'the old days', 'traditions', and the transfiguration of the body are neatly opposed to the tropes of 'modern education', 'changed life styles', 'Christianity', 'new millenium', and 'two generations down the line.' In this paradigm, the 'challenges of modernization' are beset by the weight of 'cultural inertia', an expression neither framed as resistance to change, nor touted as frustrations with the



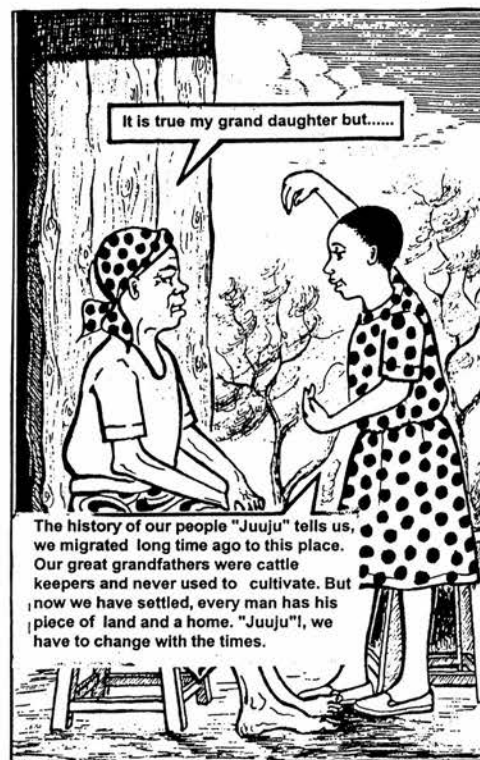
04



05



06



07

Figure 5: Today's Girl: FPAK pamphlet on 'Female Genital Mutilation' (1997)

expectations of modernity (cf. Ferguson 1999). The stress upon historical differences between the generations, in the late twentieth century, is voiced in a language of human rights in which Mwendwa's (the fictive Meru girl) 'full potential' and 'future progress' stands outside of the local moral-economy in which neither gender nor generational hierarchies are deemed legitimate.

Earlier campaigns which targeted elder women *mûtaanî* (circumcisor) in rural areas have been superseded by more 'culturally sensitive' approaches to the problem. Following a line of argument that was echoed in the colonial past, NGOs have recently stressed the social values of initiatory practice, of *rites de passage*, while still unflinchingly condemning all forms of excision. A favoured approach stresses initiation as an essentially educative practice, which is more about changing the 'mind' than it is about modifying the body. As such, NGO activists working in Meru and elsewhere in Kenya where excision is practiced undertook a programme which aimed to 'circumcise through words', a motif which was (rather awkwardly) rendered into Kîmerû as *Ntaanîro na mîgambo* (cause to be cut with speech). The organisation which funded this programme, Program for Appropriate Technology in Health (or PATH), put out the following press release in 1999:

Young African women facing ritual female circumcision or female genital mutilation (FGM) now have an alternative, due to pioneering work by grassroots African organizations and PATH (Program for Appropriate Technology in Health) a Seattle nonprofit. The new direction is partly a result of meetings among Kenyan mothers two years ago, seeking alternative ways to usher their daughters into womanhood. The mothers hoped to save them from the painful and dangerous mutilating operations widely performed on the external genitalia of young African women as a rite of passage. The local group calls itself "Ntanira na Mugambo" which loosely translates as "circumcision through words." With support from their local community the women have devised a new approach to initiation into womanhood that includes song, education, celebration, and a week of seclusion. The new "circumcision through words" ceremony was first performed in early 1996 for a small group, followed later that year by a larger ceremony for 50 young women and their families. On Aug. 15 of this year, an even larger ceremony was held for 70 young women. This

transformation was preceded and supported by studies conducted in 1991 and 1992 by PATH and Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization (WYWO). The latter is a Kenyan women's organization committed to improving the health and welfare of Kenyan women. PATH develops health programs and technologies that fit the economies and cultures of developing nations around the world. The studies, in the Kenyan districts of Kisii, Meru, Narok and Samburu, revealed the prevalence of female genital mutilation in these areas. These practices are most widespread in Kisii, where more than 95 percent of young women are circumcised by age 12. Female genital mutilation is practiced in more than 50 percent of the districts in Kenya. The new ceremonies were developed through a series of workshops conducted by the communities and the women's organizations, with support from PATH. The groups developed an array of new materials, including poems, skits, and songs, as well as information sheets. The new ceremonies were first instituted in the Tharaka Nithi district of central Kenya. In August, the actual ceremony of initiation was preceded by a "week of seclusion," which emulated the traditional healing period after circumcision. The young women were accompanied by female mentors during this week, who taught them skills they will need for their own families. Other community trainers instructed the young women on issues such as sexually transmitted diseases, relationships, and reproductive anatomy. This period ended with a colorful ceremony attended by hundreds of community members and leaders. Festivities included singing, dancing, and dramatic presentations by the young women. The presentations included messages such as "female circumcision is outdated in modern life. Young women do not become mature by being cut, but by education." The young women gave gifts and were showered with presents. They received new clothes and feasted with the guests on traditional food commonly served at circumcision ceremonies (PATH 1999)

In another report on the programme funded by PATH, a reporter, Malik Reaves, from the *Africa News Service*, wrote earlier that families in Tharaka were taking to the 'Ntaanîra na Mûgambo' project with enthusiasm. The recognition that initiation through excision could be replaced by initiation through education is unabashed in its liberalism:

Yet female circumcision encompasses more than the practice itself. It is often a deeply entrenched in the culture, wrapped in a complex shroud of assumptions, taboos, and beliefs that impact a woman's social status and personal identity. Indeed, it seems the central defining achievement of Circumcision Through Words is not that it saves young women from the dangers of FGM but that it captures the cultural significance of female circumcision while doing away with the dangerous practice itself. "People think of the traditions as themselves," said Leah Muuya of MYWO. "They see themselves in their traditions. They see they are being themselves because they have been able to fulfill some of the initiations," said Muuya in "Secret and Sacred," a MYWO-produced videotape,

distributed by PATH, which explores the personal dangers and harmful social results of FGM. The tape explains that female circumcision has traditionally signaled when a young woman is ready for the responsibilities of adulthood. In answer to that, Circumcision Through Words brings the young candidates together for a week of seclusion during which they learn traditional teachings about their coming roles as women, parents, and adults in the community, as well as more modern messages about personal health, reproductive issues, hygiene, communications skills, self-esteem, and dealing with peer pressure. The week is capped by a community celebration of song, dancing, and feasting which affirms the girls and their new place in the community. Indeed, after witnessing the community's response to the first celebration, MYWO Chair Zipporah Kittony said she was "overjoyed" and believed it was a critical achievement in their efforts to eradicate FGM (Reaves 1997)

How do self-proclaimed 'modern' girls, like the character in the FPAK pamphlet, respond to the debates forming around excision? The extent of the discomfort some young Meru women and girls feel about clitoridectomy is profound. By 'feel', I draw upon transferences and demonstrable expressions of anxiety witnessed among young female informants. In a classroom, while reviewing a 'traditional societies' unit in a social ethics course I was teaching at a girls' high school, a casual mention of the Kimeru words *nkenye* and *ngutu* brought about a peal of self-conscious giggles. Whether their outbursts were projections of embarrassment or shame, I was not certain, but it proved to be a discomforting topic for the students. Ironically, it would later make me experience a wave of 'shyness' (*nthoni*), when rumour reached the staffroom that I somehow thought 'FGM' was a 'good thing' (*mûcûnkû mûthûgania gûtaanîra aarî nî înto îmîega*). *Nkenye*, of course, means an 'uncut' girl, while her counterpart in the figure of the *ngutu* has been 'cut' and, thus, sexualised and prepared for marriage. Probing the class for their views on 'FGM' (the preferred acronym for 'female genital mutilation'), I came across a mixture of concern and prejudice. Many of these pupils' mothers and grandmothers would have undergone the rites involved, but it was clear that the sensitivities and, indeed, the subjectivities of those who had been 'cut' in this way would have no place in the

educational programmes of NGOs and their representatives. Hegemony had been established: “FGM is the greatest evil.”⁴⁹



Plate 14: Joy Adamson’s representation of women’s life-course from uninitiated *nkenye* to elder *nkirote*, (Chuka, 1950)

Many younger Imenti informants displayed contradictory views on whether girl initiates were any different, in behaviour, from their uninitiated counterparts. Mûkûba, herself a young single mother, once questioned me in English, “Where can you see the difference? And, they are saying their age-mates are going to disco... all of them... whether they are circumcised or not.” Latterly, however, she tried to explain why *gûtaanithua nkenye* (or *ntaano cîa aarî* in Kîimenti), still had appeal amongst those she called “minorities” in the community. According to this twenty-three year

⁴⁹ Lest I be misunderstood, this is a quote from an employee of a local educational institute which I shared with dozens of young women as a means to talk about clitoridectomy. Its association with ‘evil’ consistently failed to make sense among subsequent women I interviewed.

old, the individuals involved in female initiations were a tiny, “backwards minority” who, she exaggerated, had not “heard of a radio or anything like that.” Curious at such a remark, I asked where these ‘backwards’ people lived and she pointed vaguely towards the north-east, in the general direction of eastern Nyambene and Tharaka, where much of the current ‘FGM’ controversy is centred. Mûkûba described female initiation as a goal for some people, just as an examination or another scholastic achievement might present itself as a goal in other households: “In Meru, there are some *other* people [laughter] with *different* traditions... now if you discover you are circumcised when you are in Class Eight, you have a process to go from Form I, II, and III... your parents push you up there, hmm? [emphasis mine]” With this attempt to understand the motives of those people supporting clitoridectomy, Mûkûba felt strongly that an initiated women was the object of ridicule and prejudice by a community which should be more sensitive:

“You know there are these programmes... it has become an open thing that this circumcision of girls is wrong... female genital [*sic*] is not good. You are even scared of being married, scared your husband discovers how you look [laughing]... and these people are forced to give birth at home, you don’t want to go to the hospital to give birth because you will be mishandled by the nurses, they don’t want to see circumcised women. It’s not even your fault! So, you discover it is better that you stayed without that circumcision, because it puts so much negative on you... actually, on your self, inside you, not even on the outside... your views about life”

Mûkûba spoke as an unmarried young mother of two. Her awareness of *self* as an internal and embodied condition of security, rather than an intersubjective and socialised measure of acceptance is peculiar, challenging some assumptions about an essentialised ‘African’ sense of selfhood. And another young woman, Kathambî, participating in the same conversation, was to suggest that the relational security and subjectivity of female initiates, those who have been ‘cut’, has been deeply eroded:

“OK... one thing... *zamani*, before it was a celebration. People knew someone has been circumcised, people are called to greet and see the

ntaanî [a boy initiate]... you see? But a girl! It is done secretly nowadays, those who want it to happen. But for a boy, he's our brother, because you are going to make new clothes, buy him a suit... that day he's coming out... but if it's you! Ha! [mockingly] No one is going to see you! Ha! You'll be hiding now like whispers... people are just gossiping, 'You see her? She's what-what!' They go laughing... how do you feel? Instead of feeling proud that now you are from a different stage to another one... *unataka kufichia tu* [you just feel like hiding]"

Such feelings of embarrassment are far reaching in their consequences for evaluations about 'African culture' among today's young people. The rhetoric of "*zamani*" (Swa. 'the past') or "*karaja-rî*" (Meru, 'a long time ago') in narratives about female initiations achieves a distancing between young people and their parental or alternative generations. But, even among young people themselves, there is disagreement about the nature of the FGM controversy as it was expressed in the 1990s. A small number of *nthaka* I spoke with, for example, stated that circumcised girls "make better lovers", but an equal number of these young men, when asked whether they would prefer wives who were initiated in the 'traditional' way, said that they wished their future wives to be 'uncut', but 'trained' as wives were in the past. Such contradictory statements demonstrate the cultural entanglements which characterise debates and arguments taking place in contemporary Kenya 'about' tradition from 'within' modernity (cf. Englund 1996).

CHAPTER SEVEN

You Don't Know Without Being Told: religion, moral crises and the local press

Identity and morality in Meru ideals of personhood

In Kîmerû thought, the impact of initiation upon an individual's subsequent life-course is explored through the metaphor of birth. Besides the use of kinship terminologies within initiatory practices, such as the 'daylight fathers' (*beethe ba mûthenya*), the metaphor of birth is implicated in the formation of age-classes, such as when someone says, "*Ratanya acîarîre Miriti*" ('Ratanya begot Miriti'). Through relying on metaphors derived from the language of procreation and parenting, Meru creatively invest the formation of age-classes with moral evaluations which identify different ideals for different persons and stages of life.

Prior to their re-birth through initiation, Meru children are considered to be passive and amoral. But in this state, children are also said to be 'pure', as in the proverb, "*gûti mwaana ûri mûgiro*" ('A child has no pollution'). In many public events, such as funerals or weddings, children participate when called upon, but are then allowed to wander off and mingle amongst themselves. In burials, children generally do not pitch handfuls of soil down into the grave as do all others. Adults told me at a funeral, "*aana batîna kêba nkorone*", 'children feel no grief.' Attitudes reflecting the blamelessness of children also extend to other public events. During my own wedding, for example, a well dressed boy of about four years old urinated casually without attracting an adult rebuke. I used to marvel at what I considered to

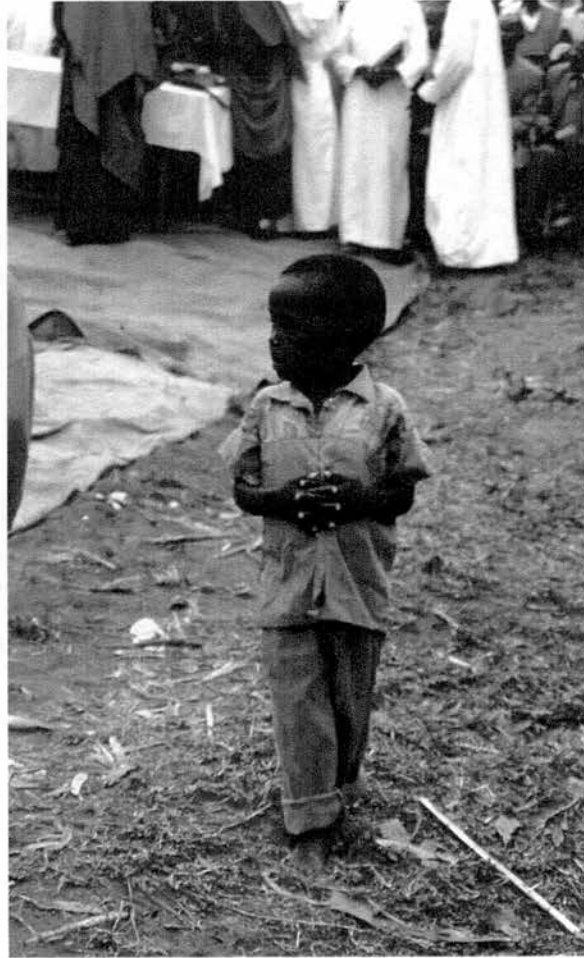


Plate 15: The composure of children, Muringene, Igembe (1998)

be a great latitude allowed to children by their parents and other adults, witnessing in children a kind of freedom which would later be curtailed at the appearance of the circumcisor's blade.

I noticed, however, that in matters involving cohorts of children, such as schooling, there is a strict insistence on their essential dependency upon, and need for, the moralising presence of adults. Adults commenting on this dependency would tell me "*Gûtî mbijî îûîrî*", 'You don't know without being told.' In many ways, this saying mirrored my own incomplete moral education among the Imenti and Tigania Meru. My position as an outsider, whose connection to community was partly contrived by idioms of fictive kinship and age-class membership, often placed me in a kind of social liminality which was comparable to that constructed around childhood, when individuals are not held accountable for their actions.

In 1998, when I first carried out fieldwork in the Imenti part of Meru and when I was then concerned with theories about the moral-economy of the household, I asked an aged grandfather whether the half-dozen or so young children who happened to be milling about in front of his son's house did any work (I had asked, "*twaana bao bathithia ngûgî mûciîne?*"). From inside his son's dank house, where we were hunkered down in conversation, he pointed out one small boy leaning on his sister. As if meditating on the significance of the question, he answered languidly, "Work around the house? Yes, they do work...their work is to play." Where I had seen it everywhere and celebrated it in everyone, this elder man jolted my understandings of agency, by pointing out something he clearly perceived to be obvious. As is often said, "You don't know without being told."

In this sense, most Meru would argue that children are not social agents. But it should be stressed that the Kîmerû sense of being social implies being moral.

Existentially, however, children are compelled by the imperative to take some mastery over their own lives, demonstrated by their absorption with play (cf. Jackson 1998: 29). In Meru, adults' ideas about the passivity of children and the negation of their agency seemed to be contradicted by the presence of neighbourhood children who embarked on adventures together as a group and seemed conscious of the fact. In the marketplace of Mikinduri, I watched school children and listened in on their conversations about vehicles, which exposed intimate details about the owners and crews of well-known buses. Often, when negotiating bush areas, off the well-worn trails which lattice residential space, I was compelled to ask groups of small boys for directions. They frequently appeared on the margins of the bush, armed with knives and bows for hunting, and would draw up to me out of mixed curiosity and trepidation. Noting this association of small boys with bush space, in conversations I learned that such groupings of *bwijĩ* are formed among prepubescent boys who intend to be circumcised together, at some anticipated time in the future. These groupings, I learned, were called *nciibĩ*, but little more than this was revealed in conversation. Speaking with young, recently initiated adults about the activities of *nciibĩ* seemed to provoke mild embarrassment. Some others could not even pronounce the term without displaying a wry grin. Later, on a return home, I reflected upon this by remembering my own bashful response on seeing a trunk full of toys I had played with as a young child, my older ego uncomfortable with the immaturity of my former self. The reluctance of my young informants to speak about things they considered themselves far removed from had resonance with my own experiences of shifting personhood.

Eventually, convinced that a straight answer about *nciibĩ* was not forthcoming, I resolved to myself that - like the adult councils of *lamalla* and *njuri nceke* which are steeped in a consciously maintained esoterica - whatever went on between *nciibĩ* was

not to be divulged except through initiatory experience. One probably enters into such a grouping conscious of the unprecedented step one is taking, only later to acknowledge that this particular step paled in comparison with others which follow. Knowledge about such organisations could only come through participation. It was, in a word, a secret. The secretive nature of peer groups stems from the locally specific hierarchies rooted in age as a primary form of social differentiation. Yet, in this secrecy and in the subaltern status of uninitiated boys to everyone older, lay a significant social tension. In forming into groups, such uninitiated boys were demonstrating agency, an act of will, a lobbying, which are properly the characteristics of the initiated.

Forming themselves into clandestine neighbourhood groups, the *nciibî*, these small boys imagine and act out what they think they would be doing upon attaining the age of initiation.⁵⁰ The inventiveness in this 'make believe' hides its seriousness, for in their playful appropriation of grown-ups' life passages, right down to pretend circumcisions, belonging to *nciibî* inverts the passivity they are constrained to display towards everyone older than them. The clandestine codes which *nciibî* maintain are a reflection of the secrecy of the *other*, adult world. And, in learning to keep their secrets and identity from adults, children learn to act upon their identity as a group, outside of being passively identified as so-and-so's child.

In the past, parents recognised the latent, but limited moral development of children and encouraged cohorts of boys and girls to interact and define, for themselves, arenas where they could exercise some freedom and control. As such, adolescent children were permitted their own spaces through which they could construct their separate identities. Persons initiated into *nthukî* historically precedent

⁵⁰ These groups of uncircumcised boys are also called *kathingiriti* or *luungî* in Igembe according to Peatrik (1999:72-5).

to the Ratanya-Ncûlûbî (c. 1947-1956) gave descriptions of neighbourhood dances, where uninitiated boys and girls were permitted to act together as a group in a public place (*kîenene*, a field), although supervised by the ever-watchful *nthaka*. Although uncircumcised boys continue to form themselves into *nciibî*, the public field and venues for dancing amongst peers of children have been subsumed by the primary school's playing fields. If any changes have been striking over the past sixty years, it is the further separation of boys and girls based on their gender, reinforced by school policies which mandate single-sex schooling after the end of primary education. Nevertheless, children's activities taking form around a football made of polyethylene and string, a game of three on three, conceal a gradual struggle against passivity at a group level.



Plate 16: Children dancing at Independent Church gathering, Igembe (1998)

It is through initiation and the re-birth of the individual, however, that the Kîmeru concept of agency (*inya*, strength or power) is objectified. An individual's *inya* is 'cooled' by healing after circumcision or clitoridectomy. Socially, however, an initiate learns to hone and control their 'strength' or 'power' through the relationships they form, firstly, with their age-mates, then, with their girlfriends or boyfriends, but also secondarily by their relations with older people and persons. There is an ongoing relationship between their own *îtaana* and those of other, older, established *nthukî*. Thus, the passage through the early life course transforms an individual from being a passive dependent and encourages a notion of agency which is realised through the creation of adult inter-dependencies and reciprocities. Action, therefore, is grounded in the possibilities opened up by initiation and the intersubjectivity that it, for the first time in the public life of an individual, thrusts upon them as an obligation. Upon entry into an age-class, a new form of intersubjectivity is encouraged and expected which is predicated on actions which discern between 'right' and 'wrong.'

Such a moral imperative assumes that *inya* is the power or strength not only of action, but also of intentionality. One Kîmerû proverb, "*ûûme būkurûkite inya*", comes to mean something like 'wisdom [intention] overcomes might [strength / power].' A parallel proverb links the integration of intentionality and moral agency to maturity: "*ûûme būrîa būnene nî gûkûra*", or 'the greatest self-knowledge comes from growing old.' This suggests that the Meru concept of agency, which springs from one's initiation, is a moral construct which is subject to some kinds of ethical ambiguity: one may possess the power to do something, but one should also be prepared to face up to the consequences of acting in one way or another. For example, former Meru understandings of pollution and sickness, in the form of a substance known as *mîgiro*, was frequently linked to sexual misconduct. Illness was often

thought of as stemming from a person's sexual impropriety. From initiation comes the imperative to accept responsibility for one's actions. Parents, siblings and neighbours present at an initiate's coming-out ceremony do not expect to see the child who went into seclusion, but rather expect to witness the outing of a transformed individual who is adult in behaviour if still adolescent in physiology. In striving to attain control over the course of one's life, and being a social equal to one's age-mates, the concept of *inya* becomes a moral limit in defining and identifying adult life.

Inya is not, however, a property of an age-class. It may only rarely be applied to a group of persons. In everyday life, *inya* is an individual capacity which expresses the presence or absence of maturity within an initiated person. This is not to say, however, that an individual matures alone by merit of their possession of strength or power and intentionality. They can, in principle, misuse such power and strength and it is here that Meru explained the disciplinary 'nature' of the age-class. By identification with an historical cohort, the *nthukî*, an individual's *inya* is subjunctive; that is to say, one's outward display of strength or power is limited by one's age-mates who are, by inclusion into an *nthukî* or *îtaana*, subjugated by the rules and laws imposed by the age-class. While the initiated adult is expected to act morally, the *nthukî* in which the individual is positioned defines morality.

In regulating the behaviour of its adherents, the *nthukî* ideally forms its own codes for judging, faulting and punishing persons who eschew a negotiated standard of moral practice. And, as Meru men and women frequently stressed, each *nthukî* legitimises its activities in contrasting ways. Besides the historical transformation in ethics, punishments meted out for transgressive behaviour, such as age-based incest, also depend upon one's position as a *mûthaka* (youth / warrior), *mwarî* (young unmarried woman), *mûkûrû* (married elder), or *mwekûrû* (married woman). In Mîiriga

Mîerû, I once witnessed a case where a small uninitiated boy had abused a young man, raising quite a scandal in the neighbourhood where the slight was committed. His age-mates rallied around the 'crime' of the insult and the young man's peers 'inducted' the child into their age-class, thus presenting the boy's parents with a fine of a 'feast bull', but which was, in 2002, a levy of several thousand shillings. The father of the misbehaving boy challenged the younger men's appropriation of the feast bull as a 'traditional' form of compensation, claiming that they had no authority to do so. Unfortunately for him, the father's lack of authority and status within his own *nthukî* left him with little option than to pay the fine. Some observers found this action extortive, while others claimed it had been justified. The different behaviour and ideals espoused by separate *nthukî* presents moral ambivalences, which, if left unchecked, leads into gainsaying other age-classes or generations' claim to moral high ground. As a kind of social tension, however, this dynamic rarely leads to overtly hostile relations between age-classes or generations. The ideal of civility, upheld through story telling about 'notorious' individuals or groups, holds sway in the relationships between persons of different ages and generational positions.

Three points are of significance to our discussion of age-classes and the historical changes in their moral disposition. The idea that morality is taught, especially through close association with peers, but importantly through engagement with people of different ages, is a persistent theme of discussions about 'wrong' and 'right' among adult Meru. In Kîmerû, this is summed up by the conceptual distinction of nature and nurture, on the one hand, and raw and ripe on the other. Another related idea is that peers may influence one another in 'good' or 'bad' manners, often earning nicknames which reflect this, such as that of the Imenti age-class, Mbaya, who were called '*Mbai*' (the 'bad' ones). Secondly, the emphasis on self-regulation and discipline

amongst members of a single age-class provides the context for debate about how to connect 'good' and 'bad' to a wider social public. Here, there is seldom much agreement on what constitutes appropriate behaviour, although clearly such transgressive behaviour, such as familial or generationally based incest, murder, and theft are viewed as threats to the public at large and punishable accordingly. A third point may also be extracted from the construction of particular ideas about morality within differentiated age-classes, and this has to do with the power of story telling, songs, and historical narratives which blame particular generations for accepting immoral practices and hastening the end of community as prophesised in quite a number of Kîmerû and Christian allegories.

Before interpreting the enigmatic figure of the 'bad' generation in allegorical Meru narratives, it is important to discuss other texts which address popular concerns about the vicissitudes of cultural history, social crises, and immorality. In the following section, several books published in Kîmerû by missionary societies serve as examples for how different genres of narrative have responded to social crises and the threat of cultural disruption and change. Key debates within these texts allow for an ethnographic reflection on the necessity of building tropes and figures about the 'bad' generation within an age and generational 'system.' What is significant in these texts is the degree to which *nthukî* are placed at the centre of debate about the Meru as a community. Similar to the lyrics of gospel music discussed in a later chapter, these texts take the Christian scriptures and the idea of a pure, mythic, 'tribal' past as their generic starting point to construct complex and often contradictory allegorical interpretations of the cultural crises of the present.

'You Don't Know Without Being Told'

1973 saw the appearance of a short book, written in Kimeru, called *Guti Mbiji Itiiri: Yuku Ria Aciari, Nthaka na Aari* (Nyaga 1973). In translation, this book is accurately rendered as 'You Don't Know Without Being Told: A Book for Parents, Lads and Lassies.' It was published by the Consolata Catholic Diocese and written by Daniel Nyaga, a priest working in Tigania during the 1960s. Although originally from Embu, Nyaga wrote in Kîmerû and was part of a small group of Catholic intellectuals in the early 1970s who advocated the use of 'vernacular' languages and the establishment of a local press to engage local populations in wider debates and arguments about the social, political and spiritual tensions left in the aftermath of colonialism. A recurrent theme of such literary production is the question of the Africanisation of Christianity (cf. Ndegwa Ng'unyura 1977; Kinoti 1984). In one sense, these intellectuals set for themselves the task of interpreting the differences between 'tradition' and 'modernity' within their indeterminate positions as African Christian clerics. In their literature, they were acutely aware of the ambiguities which deeply affected local communities' abilities to negotiate the changes brought about by political independence and the end of formal colonial rule. For these authors, 'tradition' and 'modernity' were aporia to which their literary production was an ethical response.

Contrary to their aims, such authors reified the polarity between 'tradition' and 'modernity' in the process of writing about them. In prefacing the first editions, the Bishop of Meru, Lawrence Bessone, encouraged people to read the book "irrespective of religion" because in it they would find "sound Christian principles corroborated by the ancient tribal customs" (*guti gwikira mantu ja Dini... mooritani*

jameega ja Gikristu, na mooritani jekiri inya na jarikua ni miitire imiega ya karaaja) (Nyaga 1973: ii). In striving to bind together ecumenical religion and the moral codes of some local traditions, these authors were not acting upon the 'scriptures' and oral traditions in an orthodox fashion. Talk about the 'Africanisation of Christianity', like all secular anti-colonial political projects, was a form of dissent which rattled the metropolises of Rome and Canterbury alike. Ndegwa Ng'unyura's (1977) theology dissertation, for example, contributed to his ex-communication from the Catholic Church because, in his own words, "To the Meru, the left hand of the *mûgwe* is sacred, and I refused to swear on the Bible with the polluted, right hand." In *Guti Mbiji Itiiri*, Nyaga's vitriol against the perceived immorality of modern child-raising and parenting casts him as an author suspicious of anything which falls outside the scope of Christian exegesis, but he also has recourse to re-writing what he calls the '*mîtûûrîre îmîega bajûûjû bwetû*', 'the good traditions of our ancestors.' This makes Nyaga, and writers like him, difficult to categorise, but it also raises difficulties about typological thinking. Are such figures modernisers or neo-traditionalists? Are the new religious movements that they represent syncretic? Such questions can only end in disappointment because they rely upon certain forms of ethnocentrism. This is especially the case with a concept such as syncretism because, as Jeff Haynes notes, the term disguises an 'ethnocentric certainty' that there is only one orthodox interpretation of a faith, centered in the historical metropolises (Haynes 1996: 169). The project of these religious Meru authors represent a kind of aporia which was represented in the cultural politics of the Meru in the 1970s.

When I first stayed in Meru Central, in 1991, one of my lasting impressions left with me was the idea of a community in turmoil. The gendered violence which erupted, on July 14th, 1991, at St.Kizito Girls' School in Tigania, was still a fresh

wound in peoples' memories (cf. Steeves 1997). Since then, my ethnographic fieldwork, carried out in 1998 and then again in 2001-2003, has perhaps engaged with a succession of largely ethical inquiries about the idea of the Meru as a community of debate. I certainly have not intended to create yet another ethnographic allegory about the African 'other' (cf. Goldschmidt 1990: 6-9), but I am intrigued by the constraints imposed upon me in what themes I may choose to write about. In other words, reflecting on the circumstances in which I encountered the Meru requires that I take the historicity of this fieldwork situation seriously. As I have come to reflect on my experiences in Meru Central and Meru North, I find that I cannot write about the 'Meru' as a community of argument without engaging with local authors. My empirical materials alone do not adequately reflect on the historical backgrounding of the fieldwork situation. I find in the allegorical interpretations and narratives of writers such as Nyaga a voice of dissent, or railment against the uncertainties of postcolonial Kenya, which is less pronounced in the otherwise significant works of foreign scholars. In particular, I am still unsure whether my fieldwork was intellectually influenced more by the ethnographic and historical writings of Anne-Marie Peatrik or Lynn Thomas, than by the local press and locally published works of authors such as Daniel Nyaga, Alfred M'Imanyara, and Matthew Adams Karaurî. I know 'Baikiao' Ndegwa Ng'unyura on a personal basis and intend to write something about his church with his permission. Partly because Peatrik and Thomas' works are more or less inaccessible to most Meru, not only in language, but also in price and availability, the local press has a greater, albeit still limited, influence upon the flavour and tone of local debate. Not all people find the work of local intellectuals agreeable. I have witnessed long and intense debates about Nyaga's representation of the 'traditional' Meru. From an ethnographic, or anthropological, perspective, the terms of these arguments are

critical to an ongoing local debate about the aporia of 'tradition' and 'modernity.'

Despite the subversive intent of this work, Nyaga is better known for a controversial ethnological description of Meru 'traditional' society, also written in Kimeru, which he published in 1986 using an improved orthography.⁵¹ Some of my informants condemned this second book by Nyaga on the grounds that it was misinformed, but I suspect their hostility had something to do with the author's status as an outsider from the neighbouring Embu District. With *Guti Mbiji Itiiri*, however, this book became part of a small collection of written documents which allowed me, as an ethnographer working in Tigania during the 2000s, to reconstruct the historicity of generation during the 1970s. Interpretations of *Guti Mbiji Itiiri* permitted me to formulate and ask questions which were originally formulated in a past, but not remote time, before my first sojourn to Kenya in 1991. Although never translated into English or Swahili (Kenya's official languages) the book is a treatise on Christian social ethics intended for an audience of youth and their parents. What is key about this book is the way in which it draws its conclusions about the vicissitudes of the present through an analogy of the 'moral' and 'traditional' and the 'immoral' and 'modern.' This analogy frequently appears in religious exegetical texts published in Kîmerû. In another chapbook published by the Catholic Diocese, the Meru of the present are compared with the statement 'Before the 1940s, the Meru were a good people': a view which is generally reflected in the invention of a moralising past by contemporary Church-going elders.

The title *Guti Mbiji Itiiri*, 'You Don't Know Without Being Told: A Book for Parents, Lads and Lassies', barely hints at its contents. In several chapters, interwoven with Nyaga's anecdotes and forays into scriptural interpretation, a

⁵¹ Daniel Nyaga (1986) *Mikarîre na Mîtûûrîre ya Amîûrû*, Nairobi, Heinemann Kenya.

decisively modern concern for 'good parenting' is contrasted with a vision of the 'tribal' past which, although moral, was 'improved' by the inclusion of Christian ethics. In other words, the 'tribal' past and the Bible become the foundations for Nyaga's allegorical interpretation for what is wrong with the present. Yet, the work makes a decisive departure from any attempt to historicise the idea of 'tradition' and produces some contradictions which are explained by allegorical exegesis of the Bible. On the 'modern' allegory, in which Christian social ethics become a necessary part of the education of boys, girls, and their parents, Nyaga's book highlights the redemptory ideologies consistent with ideas of development. His readings of redemption focus on the bodies of adolescents (a category which has no equivalent in Meru concepts of personhood and the life-course). In this vein, chapters cover 'sex education' (*ûritanî bwa 'sex'*) through to advise for parents about the social, epidemiological and moral dangers of cigarettes (*ndagitari mûnyuui wa thigara*), drinking and alcoholism (*ncoobi na wogiti*), and the threats posed by disco halls (*ndanci teka îthûûkî*). This document is a fascinating glimpse at the intimate political dramas unfolding in schools, at church congregations, and within families during the early 1970s.

But what of this period and its historicity? How have the people who were schooled and initiated in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s constructed themselves and others in the contingencies of this period? How have the inter-subjectivities of a generation comprising two age-classes been represented and narrated for a person (myself) who was publically known to be a social interloper, perhaps impossibly demanding to understand the old and young alike? These questions are posed because they emphasise the problems of historical perspective that ethnographers must inevitably face.

According to informants' biographies, this period was known as a time when people began to abandon the patterns of avoidance between the generations. It was around the time of the first Gwantai being initiated in 1983, I was told frequently, that *ntaanî* dared 'for the first time' to speak face-to-face with their mothers after their operations and re-birth as *mûthaka*. Indeed, being accustomed to the Euroamerican practice of maintaining eye contact - as a putative sign of attentiveness - more than once I failed to realise that I was being addressed by a social 'mother' because her gaze was fixated somewhere in the beyond and I thought she was speaking to an unseen figure behind me. After a curt rebuke, I was all ears. An elder of the Mîcûbû age-class demonstrated for me what bodily comportment he would have displayed to his father in conversation by turning his back to me! This left me unnerved. The embodied nature of avoidance between the generations, while becoming gradually less accentuated, is still maintained in spatial movements. I was once stunned into accepting this level of estrangement between parental and filial generations when an informant, the father of a boy I was walking with, refused to acknowledge our presence or my greeting despite his usual conviviality. I also noticed, when reading over fieldnotes, that the greatest gaps in my biographic profiles of *nthukî* were for those categories of persons deemed to be the age of my parents. While this was a source of anxiety - of not having enough biography on the key cohorts implicated in Meru's demographic expansion - it was also a doorway to knowledge about the relative isolation of the generations. Through some kind of transference, possibly on my part as well as that of informants, the lived dimensions of generational estrangement had been internalised methodologically. Similarly, Anne-Marie Peatrik encountered such avoidances during her fieldwork among the Tigania and Igembe (Peatrik 1999: 31). Because today's young people do not adhere to this pattern of

avoidance, older informants insisted that they have become 'mannerless', pointing out that youth no longer appreciate personal discretion and act imprudently in front of their elders.

Sensitive issues, such as sex, are also deemed to be inappropriate subjects of discussion between filial and parental generations. This is despite the existence of sexual joking between grandparents and their adult grandchildren. Such joking between the alternate generations stems from the Meru pattern of naming *ntagu* (namesake), where a girl grandchild may be referred to as 'my wife' (*mwekûrokwa*) or 'my lover' (*mûnyanya*) by her grandfather. The 1970s, however, are now known to have been something of a 'sexual revolution.' Many formerly preserved sexual prohibitions, such as having relations with a categorical 'daughter', 'mother', or clan 'sister', were considered irrelevant to newly emergent categories of relationships based on English-language ideas of 'love' or 'playing sex.' To give an idea of how public ideas about courtship changed in a brief period of time, people no longer referred to the girl and boy relationship as *kûgambia*, literally 'on speaking terms', which reflected longer-term expectations of bridewealth negotiations and marriage, but began to speak of 'sneaking' which chiefly referred to the newer practice of keeping relationships secret at great cost. Kîmerû terms for such relationships gradually became replaced with English ones in which the meanings were much more ambivalent to Kîmerû speakers. In addition, sociological changes contributed to this 'sexual revolution' in Meru during the 1970s. Parents complained during this time that their sons and daughters could not define who was a relative and who was not, nor determine who was considered subject to rules of social avoidance. Older theories about the relation between pollution (*mûgiro*) and illness were swept aside by stronger convictions in etiologies derived, partially, from biomedical frameworks. Once, an informant confided with me that,

when he was a small child, his grandmother had forced him to carry a small charm (*mûtheega*) under his armpit to ward off pollution and to dispel witchcraft. Twenty years later, as a university educated health worker, he found this difficult to understand, but also mildly convinced that it had protected him from some childhood illnesses. Sexually transmitted diseases, such as *gatego* (gonorrhea) and *maria* (syphilis) was once thought to have come from having sexual intercourse with a woman who had miscarried or aborted, giving theories of contagion a precisely gendered form. Although ideas about *mûgiro* have largely faded, many local people remain convinced that HIV/AIDS, called *mûtheera* in Kîmerû, is an ancient disease which killed many people of the Miriti *bantene* (1870s) which has returned to infect and kill the current Miriti, who are said to be similarly tainted with contagion.

The confusion in how to behave was not necessarily the outcome of the lack of a set of moral codes, but the diversity of choices left open to follow and adhere to. Caught in between the imagination of 'modern love' and the resonance of previous sexual prohibitions, quite a number of local youth expressed their frustrations with the lack of clarity on choosing spouses and engaging in sexual relations, as testified by the following conversation with a young Imenti:

"Ciwî comment *ûmba kûgiue ûrîa antû bagûragûrana nandî?*"

"Give a comment on how people marry nowadays?"

"Ntuku cîa nandî, ngûranû cîa nandî tî ja cîa ntene... mûntû nagwîta taunine nau bwacemania na mûntû nau... nyuma ya ntuku îjîri îthatû bakaana nja kwao. Kwa ba mûthaka. Kana inya gûtiûtenue kwi na mantû ja jau... nûkwona antû nî kwendana oûu... baagi inya kûgûrana nîûntû family yenu... ya ba mûthaka îna mbeça... nandî ûgwe nûkwenda gûkûinua nî mbeça îrîa îî tî inya ûcoore bûngwa na ntuku cîa nandî kwe na mwanya jwa ngûranû cîa nandî na cîa ntene."

"These days, the marriages of today aren't like those of the past. A person can go to town, meet a person, after two or three days they go home. The home of the

young man. [This is done] even without the consultations as was in the past... the inviting of the in-laws and union of the two families... now there are no such things. People are loving in any old way. Some are marrying because the man's family has money, so the girl is enticed by money, so it is not true love [*tî inya ûcoore*, not strong friendship]. So there is a difference in today's marriages and those of the past."

"*Ûgi-compare-aga time cía nandí na cía mbere ní difference íríkú úkwona úríá antú babairia family ciao?*"

"Comparing now and the past, what differences do you see in the way people start their families?"

"Difference *cía úríá antú babairagia... mbere mûntú agûranaga ní ûntú bwa nthukî... ûgikira gûtigwa ní nthukî yenû... îî nthukî yaku... ûkona ng'ania naragûranue na ûgwe útîgaarûne wakira gûtewa mono... îndí nandí nthukî îtî-matter níûntú ûgwe nandí womba kwithirwa two na nthukî îmwe wa wathiririe cukuru Form Four... wakara mîaka îrí ûkagûrana... nanî gîtaita mbere geeta inya university... gacoka geeta gû-further mbere nandí ntîona kanya ga kûgûrana... kîîja kûgûrana ndîna mîaka îmîkûrû... buugi nabû ntene tî lazima wîthirwe wîna na mbeca kenda ûgûrana... îndí nandí ûgwe nûukire kûgûkina útînacío níûntú útîumba gû-support family."*

"In the past, one married because of *nthukî*. You would fear being left behind by your age-mates. You would see somebody has married and you have not, so you would fear to be left so far behind. But these days *nthukî* does not matter because we could be of the same age and I leave school at Form Four, stay two years and then marry, but you go to the university or even for further studies abroad, such that you don't get time to marry, so you would come to marry at an older age. The other thing is in the past it was not obligatory that you have money for you to marry, but now you might fail to marry without money because you can't support the family."

Other Imenti informants, particularly young men and women, spoke to me about keeping their relationships secretive, such that their parents would not know who

they were courting. A dominant theme of conversations about courtship revealed a strong fear that one would 'play sex' or 'love' with a clan 'sister' or 'brother.'

Mûtethia, one of my closest friends in Meru, put the situation this way:

"You see, at times, with the clans, they still have a strong impact towards these things... and you can never rule it out, 'cause although they are not as strict as they used to be, it is also very embarrassing once they know all these things. I don't think a time will come when one can marry his or her kinsmen, because these things will start first at home, the parents will try to wreck everything, then if now it goes to the clan as a whole... you will not wait for these things to be told not to marry... it is so embarrassing that you will have to break the relationship. To some extent, the clan itself is also a factor that contributes to not exposing these things, 'cause they can say, 'We don't marry them'... let's take for an example an inter-clan marriage... like the Kîrîamburî is not supposed to marry the Omo, that's an example, then let's say you are interested in that particular lady from a particular family. How would you then expect to expose these things, when you know these things are very bad? That's why you see there are people married somewhere there in Nairobi, and some other places, so that even if they come now, they won't be asking so many questions, but they will always live as social outcasts. It's because they did exactly what was not expected, because as far as grandmothers are concerned... we take these people as sisters and brothers, fathers and mothers. So...now [we are] so far out of control as these social matters are concerned... they feel that [all this] is something that is not so good"

Within several weeks of recording this conversation with Mûtethia he experienced a difficult period in his relationship to his young wife because of the "interference of her people" in matters relating to her family's bridewealth. But Mûtethia's experiences of difficulty were by no means unique.

An elder woman from Kunatî, eastern Tigania, described to me how her Miriti son married a woman in Nairobi with whom their clan was affiliated with as *gîcîaro*, a clan relation which was subject to a marriage prohibition. The man spent several years working in Nairobi, but following the loss of his job as a construction worker, he returned to Kunatî with his wife and two children. Upon realising that the two were in breach of the *gîcîaro* pledge not to intermarry, the clansmen and clanswomen of the man compelled the couple to undergo an expensive and humiliating cleansing rite (*kûthinjanua*). The couple did so under considerable duress, but brushed off the

controversy between the *gîciaro* clans by exposing their relatives as 'superstitious' and 'ignorant' of the way they had lived in Nairobi.

In another case, from Mîiriga Mîerû, Imenti, a young man proposed marriage to his girl friend. Not long afterwards, an elder was sent to speak with the young man to dissuade him from seeing this particular girl because she was from one of the *ngiranî* clans. In translation, the *ngiranî* were said to be 'abominable' clans, who were subjected to a curse which is said to affect its women.⁵² The *ngirani* clans are said to have "very beautiful girls", but are prohibited from marrying anyone but a man from another *ngiranî* family or polygamous elders. The only endogamous clan in Meru, it is said that if a man takes a *mwari wa ngiranî* as a wife, he is fated to die prematurely. This particular young man resisted the elders advise and continued to be harassed by his clansmen until, one day, he gave into their pressures. He was enraged and embarrassed, not to mentioned saddened, by the interference of his clansmen in what he felt was his "private life." Versions of the following tale were told to me by several people about the origins of the *ngiranî* curse:

"Once upon a time there lived a beautiful young girl who came from a poor family. Many of the young men visited her father's house, hoping to open up a courtship. But, then, her father betrothed her to an old man, to be married as a second wife. She went to her old husband's house with a terrible heart and swore publically that she would rather die than be an old man's wife. In revenge she proclaimed a curse: 'May my life be taken so that no other female descendant of mine be taken as a handsome young man's wife. Let them be beautiful, but the lowly wives of old men. If they marry a young man, let their husbands perish while still young!' This girl then threw herself into a river and drowned herself. Her curse is still there. The only way a young man could protect himself from the curse when visiting a *ngiranî* late at night is to collect a torch (*kinyanga*) to throw outside the gate to avoid being eaten by a *norocû*, a kind of fantastic beast."

A second incident related to the elopement of a young man with a *ngiranî* girl from

⁵² For an ethnographic parallel on the *ngiranî*, see Eric Roth's (1993) discussion about the Rendille *sapaade* girls.

their rural homes to the relatively anonymous urban life of Meru Town. This couple, who 'loved' each other and who had maintained a lasting relation from the age of being schoolchildren, eventually planned a large wedding and set about making the necessary social arrangements. They were, however, shocked by the behaviour of the groom's parents who, learning the true clan identity of the girl's people, refuse to convey their blessings upon their son's matrimony. The refusal of a parent's blessings in marriage are akin to a curse and, subsequently, the couple could find no appropriate course of action to take beyond a civic union in the offices of the provincial administration.

Beginning in the 1970s, however, the category of 'youth issues' included the 'western' idea that sex could be, and should be, discussed within an educational forum. Previously, the whole field of knowledge about sexual matters was integral to initiation for both *ntaanî* (boy initiates) and *ngutu* (girl initiates). Sex was, as a rule, never discussed between a parent and a child, for whom such a conversation would be improper and even incestuous. A more evasive practice was to speak of sexual activities euphemistically. Thus, as a lukewarm example, reference to 'doing work' (*kûthithia ngûgi*) was a code for sexual intercourse. Between lovers there are different registers, which may be vulgar when used in cross-generational contexts. For examples, when sex is solicited one asks for tobacco (*kûmathira mbaki*); and 'getting some' can be described as 'having a bite' in the commensual sense (*nkûrûma îmwê*). The use of metaphorically embedding sexual meanings in everyday things or objects is creative and constantly being renovated. In Kîmeru, it is socially easier to describe female and male genitalia through the metonym of the mortar and pestle (*ntîrî na mûthîî*), or describe a girl's first menstruation as 'spitting' than turn to the seldomly iterated words for these body parts and functions. Mastering euphemistic speech in Kimeru is well within keeping close to the ideal of 'shyness' (*nthoni*). These kinds of social

speech acts were maintained where the context included persons of adjacent generations, as happens between parents and children. In the 1970s, however, explicit English and Swahili terms came to supplant implicit references to sex in Kimeru. Miriti (Tigania) and older Mûng'atîa *jwa kilo* (Imenti) respondents told me that English terms, especially vulgar ones, could be spoken of in front of their elders innocuously because they would not be understood as shocking or abusive. There is nothing especially remarkable about peers cultivating their own use of language, which may be unintelligible to those positioned outside of their cohort. What was significantly changed though, was that the brash use of English and Swahili terminologies for generally sensitive or inappropriate topics of conversations subverted the prior insistence on generational separation or estrangement. The difference, in the 1970s at least, was not that filial and parental generations spoke with different idioms, but that they even spoke at all!

It was perhaps this innovative change in the relations of children and parents which prompted Nyaga to write his book, 'You Don't Know Without Being Told.' It is instructive, at this point, to mention that while local intellectuals and educators were relying on Kîmerû as the language through which perceived crises in morality were to be discussed, it was simulteneously being overshadowed by Swahili. With greater numbers of children passing their KPCE than in previous generations, the children schooled and initiated in the 1970s found written Kîmerû rather poorly matched with the popularity of Swahili and English literacy. The problem with books like *Guti Mbiji Itiiri* was that its moral argument was written in a language considered by many Kenyans as parochial and ineffective in promoting the ideology of development. Later publications tended to be in English, with the result that basic literacy in Kîmerû was gradually abandoned as a goal of the religious community.

Guti Mbiji Itiiri contains many stories and references which reflect on meanings about 'the good life' derived from both Christian scriptures and Kîmerû narratives. It is in this sense that Nyaga's work is largely allegorical. Nyaga's turn to allegorical interpretation of the Bible and Kîmerû *rûgono* (stories) allowed him a critical textual way of engaging with the social and cultural crises he perceived in Meru during the 1970s. Allegorical interpretations and narratives are flexible in that their genre changes over time, yet the source of these allegories makes great use of symbolism from a number of archaic traditions. As such, works like *Guti Mbiji Itiiri*, in its exegetical and poetic moods, place text within a historical dimension where they have both a past and a future (Whitman 1987: 11). By speaking directly to the social conflicts, tensions, and crises of the 1970s in postcolonial Meru, Nyaga's focal perception of the immorality of the present is countered by the indeterminacy of the 'traditional' past and the 'modern' future. His arguments are legitimated by denying the present its own historicity and looking for authentic meaning in what once might have been and what possibly could come to pass. In other words, Nyaga's critique of Meru social life in the 1970s was founded upon an indeterminate idea that the Meru were a people which had, allegorically, fallen from grace. Biblical parables and a variety of Meru forms of narrative, such as stories and fables (*rûgono*) and proverbs (*njuno*), were also placed with a temporal history in which this fall from grace was hastened by the influence of the immoral White colonialists, especially Kang'ang'î, the first District Commissioner. In response to the uncertainties of differing ways of behaving and new models of choice and constraint, texts like *Guti Mbiji Itiiri* were produced in partial response to Nyaga's observation that previous generations of Meru could not speak directly to one another. In casting his rôle as a mediator between the generations, the priest plays figuratively with his own ethically ambiguous relation to being a 'spiritual'

father (*batîrî*, from *Padre*). Allegory, at least, allowed for extrinsic sources of interpretation about the nature of historical, spiritual, social, and cultural crises. In addressing a story told to him by an elder Imenti woman, where she had come close to being crucified for a sexual offence, but 'saved' by a 'white man', Nyaga turns to allegorical readings of Meru punishments of immoral acts by linking these to other extrinsic traditions issuing from the Jews, Hindu, and Romans (Nyaga 1973: 95-6; Nyaga 1997: 74-5). The following is the analogy drawn between Mosaic law and that imagined for the Meru before the *Pax Britannica*:

Ugakuamiira uria amaramari batwire kuritithua nthinje ni migongo mwanya mwanya, woona ati nthinje imwe ya iria inene itwire kunenkerwa amaramari ni kuuragwa. Kira twone aniini uria migongo mwanya yathithagiria amaramari.

It should be noted that it is not only the Meru who had such abhorrence against sexual immorality. Other people's stand on this matter, in a way, testifies that a human being, despite his weakness, naturally craves for purity of heart and moral protection in the family as well as in the society. The following are just a few examples of such peoples:

Ayahudi

The Jews

Gatigatine ka Ayahudi, mwari, athiritie kwingwa ni muku wawe nyuma ya gwiki niuntu bwa kwithirwa ataari 'bikira' agiika, neka oraagwa na maiga, tontu nathithitie uthuuku bubunene gatigatine ka Aisraeli. Ningi muku agwati na ithuukia ria kwithirwa amaamite na mwekuru waitha neka oraagwa amwe na mwekuru uu. Nawe mwari uumuujuru, kana 'bikira', aringithithia umaramari akigambagua ni muntu ungi, neka oraagwa amwe na muntu uu bamaramarite nawe. Indi mwari uguri aringigwatirwa kithakene na inya, atoraagwa kethira neka aagitie muntu wa kumutunyukia, ni ntomurume woraagwa wenka. Nawe ntomurume aringimaramara na mwari utiguri aaritithagua nthinje, na nyumene agakinyiirua kujukia mwari uu ae mwekuru wawe utuurone bunthe

These people desired to see their daughters married as virgins. In this regard, if a girl was expelled by her spouse on the grounds that she was not a virgin at the time of marriage, she was stoned to death because she had committed a heinous crime in Israel. If a man and woman were caught guilty of adultery, they were both stoned to death. Similarly, if a girl who had been betrothed to someone was caught on the way or in the town and lost her virginity, she was stoned to death because she had not cried for help. But a virgin girl whose screaming had availed nothing was spared of death. It was the man alone who was stoned to death.

This highly extrinsic link to the Israeli may appear distant and spurious to the outsider, but effective allegorical interpretation and narrative depends upon such distanciation and indeterminacies. It is not the point of allegory to create one-to-one correspondencies between text and its meaning (Whitman 1987: 17-9). Many Kenyan peoples have allegories of an exodus, not unlike the stories told of the flight of the Jews and their escape from the tyranny of the Pharoahs. Answering the question, where did we come from?, many Meru answer either *Misri* (Egypt) or *Mboa* (Shungawayaya). Although John Lonsdale (1995) has qualified the *Misri* link in the context of labour migration and an emergent ideology based on readings of the Old Testament, these stories are so widespread as to open further questions about exodus in Kenyan allegory (cf. Ochieng 1972). In Meru, this narrative of exodus from *Mboa* or *Mbwa* and the arrival of the proto-Meru clans in the Nyambenes and Mount Kenya region is the most commonly heard Kimerû allegory, which has been insightfully analysed by Anne-Marie Peatrik (1999: 381-423). All the narrative elements of the Meru exodus from *Mboa*, or Shungawayaya - the parting of waters by the striking of a sacred rod, enslavement, flight and persecution, wanderings in the wilderness, and eventual spiritual redemption in the founding of a promised land - are recognisable in allegorical form among the Abrahamic myths of Judaeism. Christianised Meru are fond of calling the Nyambene Ranges, the New Canaan. Even the Meru insistence on circumcision is claimed as an originary Jewish 'survival' from their wanderings in the desert. One local author, Alfred M'Imanyara (1992), wrote a highly allegorical history, *The Restatement of Bantu Origin and Meru History*, in which he attempted to link the proto-Meru clans arrival into their present homeland as the end of a lengthy exodus from the Sudanic Meroe kingdom, where the proto-Meru were assumed to be a branch

of Falasha Jews. When European missionaries encountered such narratives, they made expressive use of the allegories intrinsic to their scriptures in order to translate the Bible concepts into Kîmerû. The depth to which such allegories respond to crises of identity and social change should not be underestimated. On a visit to the Nyambene Forest, the guide who led me along the ridges and valleys stopped to show me where Abraham had rested and stayed in his wanderings in search of a home. In the guise of the parish priest's allegorical tales and literacy in the vernacular, a novel way of inventing public morality was encountered which steered a course through the polarities of 'tradition' and 'modernity.' In the 1970s, not knowing how to respond to change and uncertainty - the aporia of 'tradition' and 'modernity' - young people went on to shape their community's encounter with modernisation through further elaborations of the allegorical genre, in which intrinsic and extrinsic narratives could be melded together into something new.

In the next section, the subjectivities of Imenti youth coming of age since the late 1970s is explored in the context of postcolonial uncertainties. By highlighting the ways in which belonging to an *nthukî* may restrict novel understandings of development and personhood, and the constraints and choices which follow from these understanding, I examine the historicity of the Mûng'atîa *jwa kilo*, an age-class which began its initiations in 1976. It is the last Imenti age-class to be formed and was still unfinished at the time of fieldwork. With some similarity to James Ferguson's (1999) discussion of contemporary Zambian subjectivities, in which expectations of development and becoming subjectively modern have been unachievable because of political and economic crises, young rural Kenyans find it increasingly frustrating to hold onto the myths of development and personal success which they grew up with. The significant crises in Kenya's political-economy have affected young people in

profoundly distressing ways, despite their capacity to refashion themselves through engaging with story telling and other forms of self-expression. The new forms of historical contingency and uncertainties lived by young Imenti highlight the ethical ambiguity which underlies age-class formation and the historicity of generation.

Imenti modernity and life in the subjunctive

Young Imenti informants occasionally took to mocking my interest in their *nthukî*. “We have none”, some would suggest, while others feigned an elaborate knowledge of the system’s intricacies, probably to appease my curiosity and position as a foreign interloper. With older informants, both men and women, the subject assumed an importance, a bridge across which I could enter into an intersubjective stance. Yet, among my peers, no amount of methodological delicacy could dissolve their conviction that, somehow, I was only interested in illusions, the anachronistic, and the irrelevant. “These things are of long ago” (*‘mantû jaja jarîkû kûraja rî mono’*), Kilemi told me during a meander through his *mîraa* plantation, “This generation, Mûng’atîa jwa kilo is the last, there [will be] no other after it” (*‘nthukî îî Mûng’atîa jwa kilo nî mwisho, îîna îngî yakinyete’*). The sense of finality and fragmentation attributed to the age-class and generational system is pervasive among Imenti youth. Despite the resignation that it has gone, and been surpassed by different means of organising life course ideals, the figurative ‘collapse’ of the generational system is openly put forward as a discursive pivot for explaining local perceptions of modernity and its morality. Anytime the pitfalls of the present are to be discussed, the essential goodness of the past is evoked.

While each *nthukî* is given a pseudonym, appropriate to its historicity, that of

Mûng'atîa *jwa kilo* is unique in that it was named by a prominent and powerful individual in Meru parliamentary politics. Jackson Harvester Angaine is reputed to have been asked, by the ubiquitous, but anonymous 'elders', to name a rapidly growing number of young initiates in 1976. This group, if they could be called that, appeared to be a group of unprecedented size and distribution, spanning communities which could have no ceremonial link but through the then weakening agency of the Imenti-based *njuri nceke*. The office of the *lamalla* was by then no longer recognised among the Imenti. In the end, a politician proved the most likely connection between disparate Imenti communities, albeit a very tactful one whose family was also eminent in the political history of the ethnic Meru. Mûng'atîa's adjacent and more senior *nthukî*, Gîchunge, were declared 'closed' after having been recruiting in excess of a decade, but no *ntwiko* was organised to orchestrate a shift in the life-course of all social positions. Local opinion asserted that the coffee boom of 1977 gave the new *nthukî* its syncretically modern nickname, *jwa kilo*⁵³, while the choice of *mûng'atîa* ('something surprising') emphasised the optimism of the period, its modernity and its comparative prosperity (cf. Lamont 1999). Taken together throughout Imenti locations, this *nthukî* comprise an enormous demographic span of individuals from fifteen to forty years of age, setting it apart from all other precedent age-classes.⁵⁴

The identification of Mûng'atîa with the political, economic and moral turbulence of the past decade is reflected in an additional nickname: 8-4-4. The nickname refers to the education system introduced to Kenya by Daniel arap Moi's

⁵³Kenya converted to the metric system in 1971 (Weights and Measurements Act)

⁵⁴ Mûng'atîa was, however, the name of an age-class which was in formation when the first European caravan traders passed through North Imenti during the 1890s on their way to Nyambene and the northern ivory trade routes. Their aggressive repute in fighting several of these traders, Arkell-Hardwick in particular, earned them the pseudonym, Memeû, by which they are generally known by elders who would have met them as children. The reputation of the current Mûng'atîa is cast as the antithesis of their heroic predecessors.

administration in 1986: eight years of primary; four years of secondary; and four years for a higher education degree. The 8-4-4s - if they may be called this without introducing confusion - demonstrate a standing contradiction in being a highly educated but massively unemployed cohort. In dozens of interviews with young men and women of this age-class, their experiences of primary and secondary education were prominent biographical features which exposed their collective sense of betrayed hope in their country's leadership. One memorable anecdote was told to me about free milk distribution within schools. According to a twenty-seven year old, she claimed that the milk had been laced with a chemical which would restrict boys' and girls' fertility when they were older. In the context of Kenya's spectacular population growth in the postcolonial period, such suspicions were grounded in both the unregulated authoritarianism of the state and the emergence of altered values about ideal family sizes and new discourses on family planning. The 8-4-4s, unlike their parent's generation, could not share in the early optimism of the '*uhuru* generation' which were born in the years immediately following Kenya's independence in 1963. Outside of these formative years spent in schooling, many youth commented on exposure to technological innovation, transformations in sexuality, and the widening arena of inter-generational misunderstanding.

Dampened hopes in the value of a school-leaving certificate were, by the early 1990s, echoed by the real decline of incomes. Most of my Imenti informants under the age of thirty were involved in a diversity of economic activities outside of agriculture. Coming of age when SAPs and policies of economic liberalisation systematically eroded the structure of coffee production and marketing, most youth looked upon agricultural jobs and labour, in the words of a high school graduate, as "part of the problem and not part of the solution" (cf. Lamont 1999).

A recently married, thirty-year old man from Chûgû location spoke to me at length about the tainted reputation of the Mûng'atîa:

“They are very misbehaved people, so they always call us *nthukî ncabûka*, as we are known to be...[but] not misbehaving in that sense, the way you [might] take it [truthfully], because we must also defend ourselves! The world has become so modern that it cannot match with the old people, so with the introduction of things like these televisions, we tend to watch so many things. Small children are getting to know such things that we used to say they were ‘mannerless.’ You can see young people practicing...early marriage, early sex...and so many other things. You see, they cannot keep to those traditions, almost all the Mûng'atîa now, so they tend now to remain much with the changing world. We tend to create a gap. And this is why we are told [that] we lack discipline”

In contrast to their Nyambene counterparts, where Mûng'atîa would subsume members of three *nthukî*, Miriti, Gwantai, Gîchunge⁵⁵, this Imenti class has been left open indefinitely since 1976. Situated within the ethnographic record, such an extended period would characterise the Imenti age-classes as defunct. Several examples of systems which were abandoned in the earlier decades of colonial rule in Kenya, such as those of the Iteso, have been cited as evidence for their insignificance within the history of colonialism and the postcolony (Nagashima 1998).

Perspectives emerging from my fieldwork on the Meru, however, suggest that the current disorganisation of age-class formation is the outcome of many generations' experimentation with choice within constraints about when and who they marry. Spanning almost thirty years in duration, those identified as Mûng'atîa *jwa kilo* in the late 1970s may live to see the incorporation of their own sons into the same age-class, should an alternative, successive *nthukî* not be formed. There is no clear way to know how informants perceived this situation. Although some elder persons found this as evidence of a kind of social apocalypse, likening the Mûng'atîa as a kind of ‘last generation’, others stated that it was too early to know whether an antecedent *nthukî* would be formed. The prospect of fathers and sons being mutually identified through

⁵⁵ In some parts of Tigania, Gwantai is pronounced Wantai or Bwantai and Gîchunge may be Ichungî

belonging to a single *nthukî*, however, presents somewhat graver consequences within thought about the proper course of marriage, generational separation, and categories of incest. However liberal informants remain about other ancillary rules and principles of the generational system, most are uncomfortable about the demographic drift currently distorting the relevance of age-class formation to contemporary marriage, initiation and the ideal regulation of the life-course. One of the elder Mûng'atîa, now in his early forties', explained this crisis as the outcome of not maintaining succession rituals:

"You see, traditionally, people used to have a kind of timetable, where maybe a certain [group of] people were supposed to marry at this age and so and so forth...There was a kind of [way] how things were getting followed up. In the end, you would realise that maybe the elders would decide that a certain age-class [is to begin] marrying...they are all going to marry...especially when there [were] these *ntwiko* and other sorts of things. But, these days there are no such things, so you can see there are so many people who are not married and they are very old. Young people are marrying before others are married. So, in this case, we have been mixed up. So, the age-class cannot have a good way of [starting] a new *nthukî*, so it takes longer. First, there was this in the past, where one could not become of a certain age before getting married, but these days there are so many things happening [such] that some are late, others are doing things when it is too early, which was against the tradition at the time. So, you end up having a group of so many people falling into the same age-class, because their children will also all come of age at one time, whether you are old or young. Maybe this is the problem: there is no procedure. There are not those things like *ntwiko* that could have told people that they've come of age. So, you end up mixing everything and having such a big age-class of very young and very old people mixing. You end up with a long period between [classes]"

The metaphor of 'mixing', used here, refers not only to local peoples' analysis of their own social life. It lends itself to further anxieties about how to determine morality in a period of uncertainty. The English term, 'mixing', was used by both Tigania and Imenti informants to describe how boys from fathers who belong to different generational fractions, or *gûîba*, are circumcised and initiated into singular and undifferentiated age-classes.

Although the circumcision of boys (*bwijî* or *ntaanî*) is positively and

assertively retained, the initiates in many Imenti locations no longer perform group circumcisions. Instead, they opt for individualised operations, often carried out by a public health nurse, under local anaesthetic either at their parent's home or in a clinic. The temporal and spatial re-organisation of circumcision - at an opportune moment and in a clinic - has produced heightened consciousness among initiates about the ambiguity of this rite and other ceremonial performances. Boys circumcised in this manner are referred to as *kîroge*, a derogation derived from the term for a pen-knife. At one time, the term *kîroge* was an abusive and provocative slander, akin to calling someone *ncabû* (lit. 'foreskin', but meaning uncircumcised). Like the naming of the Mûng'atîa *jwa kilo*, encouraged by MP Angaine in 1976, the decision to persuade Imenti parents and young boys to visit clinics or solicit the aid of nurses to perform circumcisions was sanctioned by the *njuri nceke* of Imenti. Under the advise of organisations such as FPAK (Family Planning Association of Kenya) who have been running anti-clitoridectomy campaigns for decades, the spectre of HIV and hepatitis infections from boys' group circumcisions led the local *njuri* to consider a campaign focused on behavioural changes in the way boys become young men (*ntaanî / mûthaka*).

The outcome of these transformations in the ways in which age-classes are formed and organised is the production of a generalised anxiety that local people are no longer 'true' Meru. In response to such anxieties and uncertainties over the future of their community, certain personalities have resorted to a creative re-imagining of Kîmerû narratives about the end of community. Similar to the allegorical project of Christian intellectuals, the theme of the 'bad' generation - as a kind of critique about the malaise of modernity - is elaborated through the re-fashioning of Kîmerû narratives which speak about the place of certain *nthukî* in telling new versions of an end of time

allegory. The following chapter draws upon some of these narratives, which were never rendered in a complete or lengthy fashion during fieldwork, but which point to the power of expression in local allegories during times of trouble, stress, and crisis.

CHAPTER EIGHT

With Bells on Their Ears: allegories of a last generation

Central Kenyan prophesies of the 'last' generation

This chapter specifically deals with storytelling in an allegorical genre. Other historians and ethnographers of central Kenyan communities have written about indigenous world views and theories of history that were articulated around prophesies recounted by nineteenth century mantics and which foretold of immanent crises in their time (cf. Anderson and Johnson 1995). As an emergent genre of history and prediction, such prophesies were retrospectively woven back into these communities' experiences of colonial subordination generations after they were first proclaimed (cf. Ambler 1995; Lonsdale 1995). A number of colonial-era allegories were derived from prophesies said to have been originally told in the late nineteenth century or even before. This was a period when most central Kenyan communities had heard of, or had been in contact with, the 'red strangers' (*nguû ntuune*, lit. red clothes) or the *bacomba* (from the coast), names for the Arab, Swahili and European traders who initiated the caravan trade along the Mombasa-Ukambani corridor (cf. Ambler 1995: 221-239). Among the most famous of these central Kenyan prophets were Syokimau (Kamba), Mugo wa Kibiro (Gikuyu), and Ileri wa Irugi (Embu). Although there were Meru seers (*arorî*) shortly before the conquest of 1908, they foretold of the coming of the Europeans ('red strangers') in formula which are recognisable in other communities, evidence that 'prophesy' often overlapped within regionally based

genres, or, that news of the interlopers was passed by word of mouth and story telling.

Whereas both Charles Ambler's and John Lonsdale's (1995) projects are limited to interpretations of prophesy in relation to colonialism, my intention here is to extend their discussion into the postcolonial era, especially in relation to the hybridisation of popular Christian gospel music and allegories said to pre-date the imperial conquest of Meru. My argument is that both pre-colonial allegory, based on prophesy, and evangelical gospel music, based on scripture, respond to perceptions of social crisis in particularly formulaic manners. Based on my interpretation of selected Kîmerû narratives (story telling) and lyrics (gospel music), I aim to demonstrate that no model of history stands outside its own poetics and politics, a point echoing Hayden White's (1973) idea that all 'historical explanations are rhetorical and poetic' in their construction. Central Kenyan prophesies of the mid- to late- nineteenth century, therefore, lend a particularly powerful means of expressing the formula and rhetoric embedded and entangled in contemporary allegories about the relatedness of the past, present, and future. Because former prophesies and contemporary gospel music politicise morality and get people to think about and debate the nature of the crises affecting their communities, their creators or raconteurs are active in shaping the way people think about themselves and their identity.

As such, social identity is seen to be in an unfinished dialectic with political morality. In the case of younger cohorts, emergent social identities have been associated with the transmutation of moral codes within everyday life. Although, in Tigania, public questions about 'proper' moral conduct of youth have been asked since the 1950s, especially since the changes introduced by the Ratanya, it is to recent decades that most informants attribute a sharpening crisis within the moral

community. The view of many elderly people is that the younger people have become greedy, selfish, and insensitive to the needs of others. This local view has a parallel with Kenyan political rhetoric, in which the country is said to have gone from an ideology of *Harambee* ('Pulling Together') to *Jitegemee* ('Fend-for-Yourself'). In a slightly different vein, self-ascribed 'African' values of communal support are said to have been eroded by individualism imported from the West. This stress on the external origins of the 'bad' conceals the extent to which there has occurred significant historical entanglements of Kîmerû and colonial ideas, resulting in a situation where local crises are discussed in idioms and registers marked by their hybridity. Meru stories about 'bad' *nthukî* are usually narrated to criticise the behaviour and manners of extant cohorts. While among the Imenti and Tigania in the early 2000s, I was struck by the variety of stories told about the immorality of 'notorious' age-classes (*nthukî cîa naitoya*). The curious Kîmeruisation of the English word 'notoriety', *naitoya*, marks the entanglements of ideas used in this community wide debate. Most of these narratives were told in the past tense, but were allegories which highlighted the debates and uncertainties of the present.

As in the previous chapter, where I argued that allegory is effective because of its indeterminacy, the genre has the advantage of being quite indirect. The quality of 'shyness', or *nthoni*, is an intrinsic ideal of Kîmerû notions of (inter)personal moral conduct. Allegorical approaches to the charge that contemporary Meru are behaving immorally allow the narrator a certain flexibility. Because of their rich stock of metaphors and analogies, allegories remain poignant in criticising today's codes of behaviour, but also permit the story teller a cautious, unthreatening way to mask the fact that the people being criticised are living persons one should treat with civility. In other words, the indirect and indeterminate character of local allegories encourage

narrators to enter the community of argument and its political imagination without the constraint of the consequences of directly insulting their parents or children.

On several occasions, I was struck by the metaphor of the coming of a generation with 'eight ears' (*'ikîja nthukî ya matû yanaana'*). Again, in a slightly different register, another prominent motif in this genre was to mention the "coming of a last generation with bells on their ears" (*'gûkîja î-ũ rûciara rwa mûthia rwîna ntvara matû'*). The figurative motif of the 'ear' is intriguing, but I have not found it useful to speculate on its specific meaning. Instead, the very indeterminacy of these metaphors perhaps explains their power of expression. Not surprisingly, when I first heard these stories, I found them vague and needed help in understanding their application to everyday life situations. A young man of the *nthukî* Gwantai, my age-mate, offered a short explanation of these quips:

"When the elders say that there will come a generation with bells on its ears, or one with eight ears, what they mean is that the last generation of Meru will be a 'don't care.' Thus, the elders say that this 'don't care' generation has come because we, the Miriti and the Gwantai, make so much noise. They say we are noisemakers. There was an old story which spoke of people wearing strange clothing, with very bad behaviour, which has happened if you look at the fashions we young people are now wearing. This 'don't care' is what we call in Kîmerû, *nyaga na mpûa*, that is to say, '*nyaga*' is to let one's livestock graze anywhere and with anyone, while '*mpûa*' means that one does not fear anything or anyone. So, when they say that we come with bells on our ears, they mean that we listen to the elders, but that we take their words for fun."

When asking other people in Mikinduri about the significance of these metaphors, I was told that seers had foreseen the coming of a generation which listened to nobody and was known for their imprudence. They were described as noisy and irreverent. Even as some informants stopped at the end of discussing such stories with the sentiment, "and these things have come to pass", there is a kind of emplotment at work, reminiscent of White's (1973) 'tragic' and 'satirical' modes of historical representation in which the 'ongoing structure of relationships' being spoken about

appear as Marx put it, 'the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce' (White 1973: 11). In its brief form above, this narrative holds meanings which are somewhat satirical, because the metaphors used are oblique enough to contain alternative interpretations, each according to the story teller's motives.

These metaphors derive their meanings from stories about coming events which were prophesised in the past (cf. Anderson and Johnson 1995). Charles Ambler's (1995) essay 'What is the World Going to Come To?' quotes his central Kenyan informants of Embu in lamenting the predictions of the Embu seer Ileri wa Irugi, said to have lived in the eighteenth century. One informant told Ambler, '[T]here would come a generation that would dance with their backs to one another... A great example of this is the current youth' (Ambler 1995: 221). Another narrated that the defeat of the Embu at the hands of the 'red strangers' would 'usher in a generation of men who would wear rings in their ears, and an era in which children would disobey their parents and youth would dance shamelessly with their elders' (*ibid.*). The Embu historian Kabeca Mwaniki (1973) takes the foretellings of Ileri wa Irugi a step further in their moral implications for the present when he writes about the prediction that the Embu would 'lose' their age-class organisation. The seer was reputed to have said:

'Between the *nthuke* of Muranja and Ndiiriri there is an *nthuke* that will be lost. The *nthuke* after that will bear children who will be having ear-bells and who will not obey their elders. When one is told something he will throw his hands about and go away in disobedience... when these will be born, they will be dancing *muturamuko* (That is, dances where people of all ages will participate shamelessly). That time, the land will belong to woman and moles' (in Mwaniki 1973: 155-6)

Mwaniki commented on this prophesy in the context of his own historicity of the early 1970s:

People interpret this as the present period where the *nthuke* have lost their ancient strength and authority. That modern youth do not seem to be paying satisfactory respect to their elders as was the rule in those days and the elders do nothing but accept the situation reluctantly. The

muturamuko dances are the Western dances where anyone is allowed to participate be he a junior, an in-law or a relation of any kind. 'Women and moles' who own the land mean the men who, now dressed in Western clothes, look like women of Ileri period (*ibid.*)

The familiarity between Embu and Meru prophecies perhaps demonstrates the interculturality of these central Kenyan peoples during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The three strands of worry in this prophecy, the coming of a 'last' generation, the 'mixing' of people of different ages and generations, as well as the inversion of gender rôles and the irreverent relation between affines, does much to depict the upheaval occurring in the colonial period. Although these prophecies were said to have preceded the European conquest of the region, from 1906-1908, by at least a century, their narration and probable transformation during the early twentieth century does not exclude them from being applied to any engagements and debates with contemporary 'visions' of social and spiritual crises. In other words, the indigenous world view and theories of history revealed by earlier prophets and prophecies offer a powerful metahistory for expressing the crises perceived in the present day. To return to White's (1973) notion of emplotment, in which the tragic and satirical dominate as tropes, early central Kenyan prophecies can be vicariously drawn upon today because they treat crisis as an 'eternal return of the Same in the Different' (White 1973: 11).

Take, for instance, the idea of a 'don't care' generation which, in Kîmerû, is rendered as *nyaga na mpûa*. Without understanding the former rôle of livestock in the Meru economy, the metaphor retains little meaning to the outsider. Over time, I came to appreciate how people formed intersubjective relations through domesticated animals and, in some cases, also insects, particularly bees. When one is said to be *nyaga na mpûa*, such as that which happened to the Ratanya in the 1950s when they

began to live with their wives in a single, conjugal home, the metaphor plays upon secondary meanings associated with cattle droving and grazing. A household which was visited by some kind of illness, or else reputed to be under some kind of sanction because of pollution (*mûgiro*), was prohibited from having their livestock mingle with those of others. The theory was that the contagion, the *mûgiro*, brought on through immoral acts, could equally spread to others through their livestock. Thus, someone who ignored this sanction and grazed their cattle and smallstock without regard to those of other people was said to be both *nyaga na mpûa*. A similar extension of human relations into the animal world also affects bees. Some Imenti claim that a man's moral disposition may be inferred from the behaviour of his domesticated bees. "The bees of a man are sometimes volatile, sometimes docile, but these bees reflect the character of the keeper himself", an informant told me after a swarm had reputedly attacked another man's bull. If a man's beehive was unruly or threatening (*îûgû ya mûntû mwene mai*), this was generally read as a visible metaphor for the man's inner will or volition towards others. As with the world of men and women, intersubjectivity also extends into that of animals.

But what about the generation with bells on their ears? Without speculating too much, some sense may be made from the 'ear' metaphor. A grandmother, in mildly chastising her small grandchildren, may pull an imagined substance, called *mbithi*, 'unripe', from the children's ears. This is a gentler version of the British 'giving the tyke a cuff on the ear' treatment. The 'ear' certainly crops up as one of the components in discussions of moral agency and personhood. In Kîmerû, hearing and listening are associated with understanding. When one wants to know if what they have said was understood, a common question to ask is, "*nûkwigua?*", or 'have you heard?' The idea of having bells on one's ears, however, cannot be reduced to simple

‘noise making’, it implies a further refinement in Kîmerû theories of mind and body and, by extension, of personhood.⁵⁶ The bells, as metaphor, likely refer to ideas about personal integrity and moral disposition. As discussed in greater detail below, the idiom of a ‘cow bell’, *ntuara*, refers to how discreet a person keeps their personal affairs. If one keeps their *ntuara* quiet, the addage goes, they protect themselves from any gossip which may sully a person’s or group’s reputation. The first time I heard of this idiom of the *ntuara*, a blind Imenti informant sang a form of self-praise song known as *lenta*:

bankiro bakwa bairî
bankiro bakwa bairî
ûmwe mûtindwa
ûnge marîgone

my two lovers
 my two lovers
 one in the town
 the other in the farm

bankiro ûgakira ngûûtû
mûite ûtuku atîkira îthike
ntuara yakwa
îî tí kûgamba
Kîronyi-o-Mûnyanû

Lovers, if you fear gossip
 going at night time don’t fear noise
 my cow-bells
 do not ring aloud
 [they call me] Kîronyi-o-Mûnyanû

This song exhorts the value of secrecy in one’s private affairs, as well as remaining stoic when confronted by malicious rumour. Although this song is about an individual, the stories about the coming of a last generation with bells on their ears, identify the ‘cow bell’ concept with a group of persons, in this case an *nthukî*. In both senses,

⁵⁶ In comparison with Meru concepts of the mind and body, as in ‘ears’ and ‘bells’, Onians (1954) noted that Empedocles, a Hellenic physiognomist, ‘taught that hearing is produced by the impact of the moving air against a piece of cartilage suspended in the ear, which rings and oscillates, when struck, like a gong’ (Onians 1954: 71-2).

however, the ‘bells’ signify the relational strains of ‘self’ through ‘other’ and the centrality of intersubjectivity in social life.

The ways in which different Meru express their malcontent with other generations are often voiced in the subtlety of euphemistic or idiomatic speech. In each of the contexts where I heard these stories being told, the point was to use the rhetorical power of allegory to speak about difficulties in social life. In other words, ‘ears’ and ‘bells’ were woven into critiques about history, personhood, and morality in such an indirect way that listeners were permitted to draw their own conclusions about the debates which centred on questions of immorality, or more existentially put, of Meru losing their way in the world. Yet, the stories about the coming of a ‘last generation’ were open ended and resisted closure. Because the framework for telling these stories were allegorical, it allowed people to avoid placing their own subjectivity at the heart of the arguments being made. To put this a bit differently, people from all the adult generations in Meru could draw upon these stories because they spoke to the collective fear about the end of their community.

The use of allegory allows social critique without transgressing the ideal of civility. Transgression of this sort is about the loss of respect between adjacent *nthukî*. These adjacent generations, once subject to avoidance rules, do come into conflict because their actions are frequently transgressive to the moral code of the other. But as will be demonstrated through interpretations of specific gospel songs, this respect is never irrevocably lost until parents and children break with locally developed ideas about long term reciprocity. While the theme of reciprocity between the generations is significant to my arguments in this chapter and will be addressed below, storytelling in the allegorical genre pertains to wider constructions of community, especially of a deep historical nature. At the heart of Meru allegories about the ‘bad’ generation and

the 'end of community' is the parallel theme of redemption. With the idea of redemption, the concept of an overarching morality is contested, but also restored and regained by the melding together of Biblical and Kîmerû ideas of providential history.

The rhetorics employed in Meru history telling, expressed by the concept of *gîtîba*, lends narrators a fluid way of linking the deep past to contemporary social concerns. Because of the cyclical logic of a history fated to return with each *gîtîba*, very old stories retain their symbolic focus by emphasising the notoriety of specific extinct and extant age-classes. For example, stories about the Miriti *bantene* (Miriti of old) are told in parallel with the contemporary Miriti who were in formation during the 1970s. On first mention, it seems as if there is an ontological relation between the two in Kîmerû thought: "*Miriti bantene nî amwe na Miriti bantuku îjî-rî*" ('Miriti of old are one with Miriti these days'). When taken into consideration alongside local modes of emplotment, however, their relationship is more accurately described as metonymic. Consider the following narratives, composed by several informants, which attempt to explain why the current Miriti are the same as those from the 1870s.

"Long ago, the old Miriti had been forewarned by their father's fathers that they had seen a terrible famine that would force the Miriti to hunt wild animals, since their herds would be decimated. The diviner of their father's fathers had seen which kind of animal would be hunted, but it was an ominous kind. They passed on this divination to their son's sons. The Miriti of old were warned that when the time comes, they should expect large herds of buffalo, but they should not hunt them lest it be disastrous. These Miriti of old experienced a famine. There was no water anywhere. Even the springs ran dry. Their cattle began to die. Miriti consulted their diviner, who saw that they would hunt in the bush, but that the consequences would be dire. There were large herds of buffalo roving about in the bush. Then, all of the Miriti warriors went out into the bush to hunt for the buffalo. They sent word back to their fathers that they were preparing a feast for the elders and instructed them to meet at a particular elder's homestead. Seeing there were so many buffalo, the Miriti began beating drums and corralling the beasts, eventually driving them in a stampede in the direction of where the elders were waiting. The buffalo, mad with fear, stampeded through the homestead where the old men were seated. They were crushed to death. To this day, the Miriti are said to be a generation with eight ears because they refuse to listen to their elders' forewarnings. You can see, also, that these Miriti of today are killing their

parents as well.”

Another version of this narrative is more explicitly linked with contemporary tensions over reciprocity between the Lubeeta and Miriti and their parent’s generations:

“These age-classes of Lubeeta and Miriti are the ones who killed the elders with buffaloes in the past. They lied that they wanted to slaughter the animals and host a feast for their fathers. These two agreed that the old people should not eat, so they drove the wild animals through the bush and crushed that homestead where the elders had gathered. These same age-classes of today, but with Gwantai as well, are doing the same thing by taking their elders’ property. They have agreed among themselves not to kill the elders with their own hands, but to deny them food and kill them with hunger.”

Each of the story tellers ended their stories with the phrase, “*mantû ja mbere jwacoka*”, ‘the things of the past return.’ The problems of interpreting these two narratives are considerable, but the theme of transgression is marked. The breaking of inter-generational reciprocities is an old theme of conflicts between the ages (cf. Foner 1984; Lamb 2000: 46-57). Told in the relative safety of the distant past, of the Miriti *bantene* who would have been young men sometime in the 1870s, these tales speak of the refusal to share food in a time of extreme hunger and link it to parricide, whether intention or accidental. Although there are no written documents about the late nineteenth century crises, oral history stands as evidence that East Africa was undergoing significant crises of disease, famine, and warfare which saw the dissolution of Maasai dominance over other communities, which would have included those of central Kenya (cf. Spear and Waller 1993). In this nineteenth century context, the power relations between patrons and clients were undergoing rapid changes, perhaps finding an apt metaphor in the status and tensions of the relations between junior and senior generations. In the context of my fieldwork, the historical analogy between the Miriti ‘of the past’ and the Miriti ‘of today’ is of an allegorical kind, which invites further interpretation of how Meru rhetorics of history have been re-fashioned to

explain the nature of current crises between the generations and within the historicity of the postcolony.

The two principal themes of parricide and the withdrawal of generationally-based reciprocities are related to other transgressions which contemporary Meru treat as problematic. In most cases, anxieties about the failure to reciprocate, parricide, and sexual transgressions would not necessarily be separated in the view of many contemporary Meru. As elderly men and women stressed, the Miriti who were initiated from 1973 to 1981 were not the first *nthukĩ* to be seen as morally transgressive. In Meru thinking on the subject, all age-classes are, by definition, despoilers and rebels. Their dissent is integral to their historical formation. But, these same informants would intone, the Miriti did not show signs of limiting the scope or scale of their dissent, such that they became synonymous with transgressions of a serious nature. One of these is generationally defined incest between social 'fathers' and 'daughters', on the one hand, and 'mothers' and 'sons' on the other. According to elder informants' statements, the Miriti abandoned or chose not to acknowledge many of the marriage or sexual prohibitions which were articulated around the formation of age-classes and the separation of the generations. This they did with considerable risk, knowing that their relations with their parents could be damaged to the degree that both succession and inheritance proceedings could be prevented by their elders. In terms of sexually transgressive behaviour, the Miriti were said to carry out adultery (*kũbungira*), incest between allied clans (*mwonkaranua*), and generationally based incest (*kĩringa ndebe*, or, 'to beat the drum').

Because the Miriti 'of old' earned their notoriety through the killing of their fathers, many people today say that "the Miriti of today are killing their parents and stealing their property." In terms of real inter-personal violence between fathers and

sons, I did not record a single case, although I did not have access to police records during my Tigania fieldwork. Occasionally, in the national or local newspapers such an incident would be reported, usually in relation to an ongoing dispute over access to land. Nonetheless, it was a very common quip made by elders to denounce these younger men as immoral “because sons should not be equals”, a difficult position to hold which is based on the naturalisation of ‘father’ and ‘son’ cooperation, despite evidence of their actual rivalry.

It was a common complaint among elder informants in Tigania to blame younger men and women for their lack of reciprocity, especially with reference to refusals to share food. A woman in Mikinduri told me and a Gwantai companion this simple story:

“When I was a big girl, we used to go up there to Kĩlimantua [a hillock which hides a massive crater at its center] to meet with one another and collect those wild bananas. In those past days, the bananas were so many and so thick that some people disappeared and got lost inside them. But, when anyone was hungry, they could go to Kĩlimantua to take bananas. Nobody minded and nobody could go without food. All of Mikinduri was a field of bananas. During drought and hunger, these bananas fed many people. But, today, if there were a drought, many people would go hungry, because these mannerless younger people have said, ‘No! You can’t come up here to Kĩlimantua to pick bananas, they are mine! Am I not the one who holds this paper [title deed]?’ And so, they finished the bananas completely. This is what is wrong with this generation today. Private land has finished all the bananas.’

The details of the story were biographical, but the perception of greed undermining cooperation, and individualism eroding the communal, speaks to the contemporary malaise with a world where ‘fend-for-yourself’ has become something of a cliché. Talk of conflict over food often foreshadows direct grievances between the generations. The churlish behaviour of young people was often criticised, but more frequently, elders lamented that they had fed their ‘children’ when they were small, but that once they had grown, they starved their ‘parents’ to death. An old woman was expressly

concerned that her own sons and daughters were denying her food. I noted that she had many pumpkins growing under her granary and wondered whether such claims were statements of fact or whether they were utterances which spoke to other issues. Another elderly woman, complained about her son's lack of material assistance:

"Ai! itwarîmite aba..."

"Eh! We really farmed in those days, father..."

"Mwarîmite na inya ûkoona ûkûmba kûthoomithia aana na kûrîma rî!"

"You farmed with great effort to be able to see your children educated through farming!"

"Û... Ndatonga abagu, ambira ndî mûrikû, ndimûrikû, ûni rî... ndîmûrikû, 'atamba kinya kaara bû!', 'atamba kinya kaara bû, ûni, atamba kinya kaara bû'. Itû ûkoona, 'No, No, No!', nîkîo gîtûmi ûkwona kîigua...mmm....mûkûrû rîmwe kaigua..."

"Yeah... I went to your own father for assistance, he would tell me, 'I'm bankrupt, No, No, No, me, I am bankrupt!', he never gave me a cent... that's why I feel so bad about him sometimes, husband, I feel bad"

Put into context, these women were expressing their unhappiness with their sons' lack of reciprocity. Elder widows frequently lived at odds with their sons' families, some even complaining that they were being treated as additional mouths to feed. The denial of food is a common complaint within households by persons who feel disadvantaged, regardless of age or position. I witnessed one incident where an ostracised young man eventually hung himself in his mother's kitchen after finding no food to eat.

***Nthukî ncabûka*, or, the 'bad' generation**

The most frequently heard idiom among Imenti and Tigania identifies these youth under the derogative term *nthukî ncabûka*. Although I attempt to gloss *nthukî*

ncabûka as the ‘mannerless’ or ‘bad’ generation, this term does not easily translate into English. Taken from the verbal root *gûcabûka*, meaning the action of persisting with a bad habit, the term plays semantically with verbs which may be used to actively describe something ‘leaking’ (*gûkûthûka* or *gûtûrûika*). These cluster of verbs connote a sense of intentionally doing something wrong. The connotation of a ‘leak’ implies a social gaffe or persistent blunders which are cheapening in terms of public esteem. In everyday speech, one often hears reference to ‘leaking’ behaviours. For example, the enigmatic figure of the wastrel is called *ntûrûika*, implying a hardcore deviant on the one extreme and a bumbling ne’er-do-well on the other. Despite the discursive backdrop of the term, *nthukî ncabûka*, the construction of youth subjectivities as ‘despoilers’, as one informant put it in English, has a long historical presence in Meru.

The outsider cannot help but underscore the contingency of such social identities upon historical conditions (cf. Spencer 1988: 236-9). In most cases, however, bad manners are essentialised. In my conversations, I listened to elders argue that all *nthukî* were ‘leaking’, asking “which age-class doesn’t leak?” (*‘bwî bûtînthukî îcabûka?’*), since they were ‘by nature’ rebellious. Others were more conscious of the historicity of bad manners and rebellion, arguing that immoral behaviour is learned and encouraged. Nor are today’s *nthukî ncabûka* without historical precedent. A cadre of Imenti women formed into a spousal-class during the 1940s, following that of the Kîruja-Nkoroi, earned the nickname *nthukî ntîbûka* because they had refused the name chosen for them by representatives of the ‘retiring’ elders. Like their women-only counterparts during the 1940s who were deemed *nthukî ntîbûka* for their resistance to the tacit power base of the elders, the formation of the so-called *nthukî ncabûka* points to the historical contingencies through which all subjectivities are articulated. It

also permits the possibility of dissolving the language of structure and system in our discussions of age-class formation and thereby, as Michael Jackson does, test out the waters of 'verisimilitude and contingency' (Jackson 1998: 36).

The association of *nthukî ncabûka* with today's youth echoes the more positive formation of reputation among the *Atemîbanjîra* in the early 1940s. The *Atemîbanjîra* or 'Trail Blazers' were the first Imenti cohort to aggressively organise themselves through the Methodist Missionary Society. It is astonishing that, even today as their members are declining because of mortality, the *Atemîbanjîra* retain a positive, almost heroic identity, while the *nthukî ncabûka* attract derogatory comment and moral condemnation. To many of my Imenti informants, this comparison reflects a greater sense of urgency for finding new models and ideas for defining what it means to be a 'youth.' Whereas the *Atemîbanjîra*, for an example, refashioned local material and moral values into specifically Christian categories of 'youth', the same process undertaken from the 1970s to the present has not produced a lasting positive impression about young people despite their greater access to social programmes geared towards 'youth' issues. During fieldwork, I questioned why this was the case. I asked why 'youth' categories tend to be maligned or championed within their specific historical context. Why is it, for example, that the colonial categories of 'youth' and 'elder' persist into the present, albeit within a locally constructed moral crisis?

In partial answer to these questions, it is possible to argue that the category of 'youth' effaces previous categories of personhood which young people could aspire towards and achieve their moral place in the world. Social categories which were once congruent with moral definitions of the life course have now fragmented. The category of 'youth' is applied to all young people, with little matter whether they are now parents or not. Formerly specific categories of person, like *mûciere* (young mother) or

mûrume (married man), highlighted the elevated moral position of anyone of a parental generation. Today, the status of parents have noticeably changed and along with the shifting of their moral definition, the relations of parents and children have also been transformed. Despite the notion of the life-course as a moral and social maturation, few young parents, today, are able to attain and appropriate any status from such social categories. Individuals are subjugated to the possibility of never becoming a 'young mother' or 'married man' in the moral dimensions of these categories.

The fragmentation of previous categories of personhood has a material dimension. As partly discussed in previous chapters, the economic instabilities of specific historical conjunctures has made it difficult to organise and sustain the ceremonies and events which mark transitions in an individual or group's life. The costs of provisioning food and providing gifts are often prohibitive to families whose main income derives from agriculture, petty trade, and rock-bottom wages. Although the past decade has been experienced as tumultuous for many Meru, a wider historical perspective might include economic crises, 'booms' and 'busts', since the early colonial period. Prior to the intense commercialisation of Meru agriculture in the late 1950s, drought and famine were perceived to be the main contributors to the delay or postponement of major life transition ceremonies. According to many informants, however, the relation between material and moral crises in Meru is not explicitly made. Changes in residency patterns, new modes of consumption, dress, sexuality, and even ways of speaking are talked about more often than encroaching, widely experienced declines of income as to explanations of the longevity of the crisis in the local moral economy.

Kagwîria, one of my *mûgwatî* (research assistant), kept her own notebook, writing down a parallel account of our research, which she shared with me at the end

of my stay in Tigania. A single page from this book condensed many of the narratives about the *nthukî ncabûka* we had collected from individual respondents:

January 18th, 2003

She told me that her age-group lost their own traditions due to white/western culture. Girl education was discouraged as they believed that girls would become prostitutes and run away with the white man and those who worked for him. Those who went to school were only from saved families, e.g. Methodist Families, e.g. M'Ikunyua and headmens. The deviation from the set norms to *gûcabûka* came when people started residing in the same houses. *Gûcabûka* refers to lack of manners and becoming *ndemi îtikwathwa*. This is also attributed to the drinking of beer for both men and women. This came as a result of the Mau Mau oathing where beer was involved. After Independence, people started celebrating day and night. These led to immoral acts being done in secrecy. These dances gave rise to night dances or discos which were done in schools at night. Young men and women danced until dawn and also old people went to watch. Long ago, men's cases were handled in secrecy or far away from women and youngsters. Also the socialising where people shared beer and tobacco was done only to age-mates never to you elders or youngsters as it is today. Confusion set in during Ratanya. Though some of Mîcûbû men had tasted a bit of learning they did not hold so much onto the western culture. Ratanya started *gûcabûka* by not showing any regard for the old generations. They started having loose talk (*rwariâ rûti kîrikî*) and obscenity. Beer became the order of the day for them. The noticeable social changes from Ratanya to us

Gwantai regards as in dressing, i.e. many women have started wearing trousers and also clothes that are above their knees and also clothes that do not conceal their whole bodies. Men and women walk together shamelessly holding each other and also hugging to kissing in public like the westerners do. More so, grown up children continue sharing the same houses with their parents which promote their immoral behaviours. Also there is increased use of alcohol for both men and women which go to the latest hours of night and once the night falls, anything gonna happen.

The idiom of 'modernisation' in local explanations of social change is marked. As with local authors who turn to allegory to render the experiences of crisis palpable, it is very common to attribute many aspects of 'immorality' to outside forces. Here, the 'West' is often mentioned as a force of rupture and disjuncture, although less people are overtly critical of economic policies enacted in the recent past, such as structural adjustment or economic liberalisation, as contributing to the current social malaise and malcontent. The 'West' represents an abstract entity with which to think about and discuss crises in identity, well being, and morality. When it comes to blaming extrinsic forces for the economic decline of postcolonial Kenya, many of the criticisms come closer to home, with politicians and bureaucrats receiving their share of condemnation. Yet, ultimately, unsettled opinion about the 'breakdown of tradition', as Lynn Thomas (2003) calls the modernisation paradigm, frequently points to the changed behaviour of local actors to argue why the Meru have 'lost their way', to borrow a phrase I frequently heard from informants.

The emphasis in talk about moral crises is the perceived loss of respect. "There is no respect" (*'gûtîna ûthoni nandî-rî'*), as the very aged reiterate. Yet, this is

not seen to be stemming from ‘youth’ alone, but effecting people of all ages, save perhaps children. Instead, each age cohort is viewed to be infected by the social malaise evoked by the term *nthukî ncabûka*. In everyday life, however, civility still persists in a world perceived to have been degraded from some purer, ancestral form. As such, in living contingently through a series of historical uncertainties, coming to terms with the moral contexts constructed around age and generation has been a major historical theme of the postcolony for Meru. In this sense, it is as if people of all ages are currently ‘living in the subjunctive’, to borrow a concept from Susan Reynolds Whyte (2002). The difficulties of interpretation notwithstanding, the aim of this final chapter is to contextualise the moral-economy into which at least two age-classes have been formed, while examining the political consequences of the past three decades’ experiences upon the construction of community.

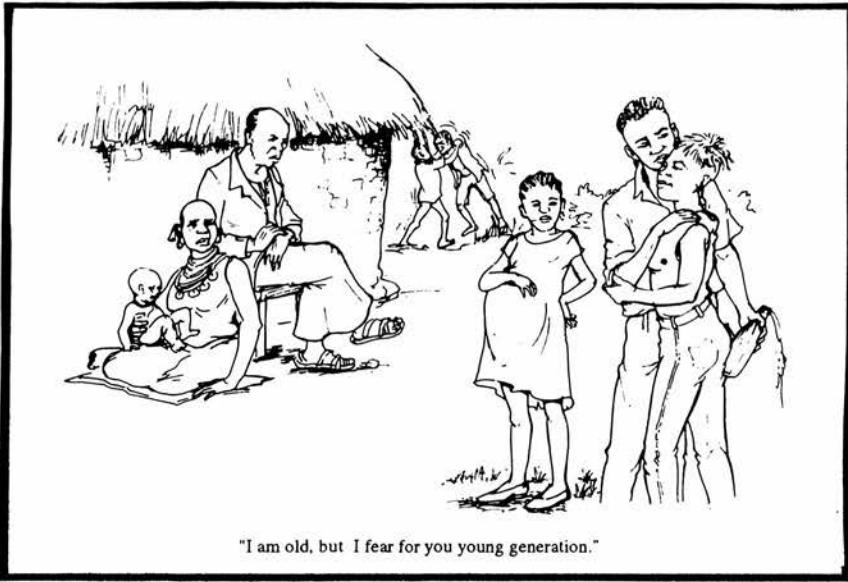


Figure 6: The Bad Generation: *nthukî ncabûka* represented in Nyaga’s *Customs and Traditions of the Meru* (1997)

Lip-synch gospel: recording artists as social critics

Gerevasio Gakula Akwalû has produced four volumes of gospel music, sung in Kîmerû, which have enjoyed wide appeal among Christians in Meru North. This evangelist is one of a dozen popular recording artists who write lyrics and perform in Kîmerû, echoing their Gikuyu counterparts who reach a wider target audience due to their larger population. Kîmerû music has had a limited history of recording artists, despite the classic popularity of folksingers such as George King'ua and Gîtonga Kathuma who sang in Kimenti during the relatively prosperous 1970s. Going well beyond the riffs played out on the *wandindi*, a one-string violin tautly bowed against the glass ribs of a coca-cola bottle, acoustic guitars and keyboards gave Kîmerû folksongs new media for expressing unprecedented moral dilemmas. Cheaper production costs in the 1990s permitted a recording boom, where local artists paid studios in Nairobi to record their performances, while the artists themselves marketed their tapes at home. Due to the popularity of the genre, this 'cottage-industry' is incapable of keeping up with the demand for gospel music sung in the vernacular. Against a flood of imported sounds and lyrics - of which pirated copies of Afro-America hip hop are mass marketed at a fraction of their copyright price - local gospel singers presently occupy a niche market. They offer local consumers of their musics a sharply contrasting call to self-fashioning which integrates 'traditional' or regional idioms with the 'modernity' of the global evangelical movement.

Although available in music shops, greater exposure is achieved through live events. These were usually performed at the edge of marketplaces or at busy cross-roads, where casual passerbys could be enticed to stop and listen to the singers' message. Not a single performer in this genre sings live, although one performer has

adapted his events upon a kind of ‘stand-up’ comedy which pokes fun at the perceived ignorance of local peoples’ interpretations of the Bible. Otherwise, the preference is always with the ‘lip-synch’ performance which, karaoke-style, retains the clarity of the audiocassettes while eliminating the need to lug around cumbersome instruments. Nevertheless, such performances necessitate the setting up of large PA systems, whose speakers belt out deafening, crackling Christian anthems. In 2002, I witnessed such events in Maua, Meru Town, and Mikinduri.

Gerevasio Gakula Akwalû, from Kîgûcwa, a small market in the tea producing zones of Nyambene, was in Mikinduri for one such performance, selling his most recent tape entitled *Nthukî Îrîa Ncabûka* (This Mannerless Generation). Planned for a market day, a large crowd of perhaps a hundred persons assembled in a light drizzle around Akwalû who, amplified by the PA system, was leading his *ad hoc* congregation in the Lord’s Prayer. Dressed in the *de rigueur* uniform of evangelicists, a tailored suit and tie, Akwalû’s height and intensity cast him as impressive and dominating. Engaged in ‘lip-synch’, the lyrics of his songs strike at the heart of moral controversy, publically speaking against faithlessness, sexual promiscuity, HIV/AIDS (*mûkingo* or *mûtheera*), social indiscipline and greed. Upon the initial chords of the title song, *Nthukî Îrîa Ncabûka*, Akwalû posed in enormous sun-glasses, adopted a contemptuous sneer, expressing his distaste for the excesses of the ‘mannerless generation’ he was actively mocking as he sang:

Î-î tî kwîna nkwîna
î jaja tî marîrî, nîngî tî ngûrî, kana kîrarîre
muntû ûrî gutû akinde mwithurîre mantû!
 Yeah, I’m not just singing songs
 Yeah, this ain’t dancing, bonding, or celebrating
 Lend me your ears, I’ll tell you some things!

Îkwerirwe gûkîja î-î rûciara rwa mûthia
îrwa nthukî îrîa ncabûka rwîna ntûara matû
rûtîkoroigua aciari nîngî rwendi mbece!

It was said there will come a last generation
A careless group with bells on their ears
Who never listen to their parents and love money!

*Îi shetani atonyete akagwatithia meeyia
akagwatithia ûkimwi akauga nî bahati mbaya
aari beeta kîthuûnu bakerwa nî fashioni!*
Yeah, the Devil's come and grabs you with sins
He infects people with AIDS and says 'what bad luck'
Girls are going naked, saying it is fashion!

*Îi womba kwona mwarî akirite nguû
yaturi mbere, nyuma na rungî
etite nûkûthooma mwîrî nyama cionthe!*
Yeah, you can meet with a girl wearing clothes
Slit down the front, back and side to side
Walking along you can study her entire anatomy!

*Îi nîngî womba kwona mûthaka ekirite
mîna matû na nyiûru, mûtwe najû piece-i
mûromo nî ta muntû ûnywite ndamû ya muntû!*
Yeah, you can also meet a young man
Rings through his ears and nose, with a hair-piece on his head
His lips are red like he's drunk human blood

*Îi arîna kîmûguto îi kîa nthukî ya bajûûjû
na kîratû kîarîte kanyua ja samaki
etite arîuga 'oh highly' yeye ndiye mwisho!*
Yeah, his trousers are sixty years old
And his shoe has an open mouth like a fish
As he walks, he says 'oh highly' he's the latest thing!

*Îi shetani atonyete akûrû bakenda
beetawa mambo yote na rîngî mdosi
onia mwaana aitha mbea agatiga cukuru!*
The Devil's come in and the elders have given up
They are called 'boundless' and the other is a tycoon
he flashes money at a lassie, she quits school!

*Îi nthukî îgûcabûka îi akûrû barenda
tûcungwa na mwekûrû îtuma nî kauzi
mûthaka akiaria na ng'ina, mwarî akaaria na îthe!*
This generation is careless, and the elders enjoy them
being happy seeing their women quarrelling shamelessly
As the lads talk with their mothers, the lassies speak with their fathers!

*Îi nîngî kwîna na bungî, îi womba kwona jûûjû
ekirite mûguto mûtwe curl-set
na goggles îrî meetho cîa gûtisha memba!*
And another thing, you'll meet a grandma
Wearing trousers and a curl-set placed on her head
Wearing sunglasses to show off she's with it

*Îi ûkîîja kûmwîta jûûjû kana ûmwîta maami
no ûmwe na ûgerete iga kwa bolisi
arîenda ûmwîte beste kana ndogo-ndogo!
If you call her grandma or mum
She'll throw up a tantrum, casting stones
She prefers being called 'matey' or 'on the side'*

*Îi womba kwithîra aka îî malaya ûtuku
corridor cîa lodging batumite laini
ja ng'ombe îrî mûnandene kana thokone!
You also meet prostitutes at night
in the corridors of lodgings, queing in line
like cows at the cattle dip or marketplace!*

*Îtûturîene maru îî mbere ya Mwathani
îtwîre Mûrungu baaba agarure nthukî îjî
bamenyane na Jesu barekerwe meeyia...!
Yes, let us kneel before the Saviour
Pray that the Lord, our Father, transform this generation
Pray for them to love Jesus and to be redeemed of their sins!*

As a study in meaning, *Nthukî Îrîa Ncabûka*, plays upon the anxiety people experience in crafting a moral response to prolonged crises of political authority. The common fear that indigenous codes of morality have collapsed is subverted by a call to evangelicise the community into moral action. Whether that of youth, or even that of the aged, the song constructs the uncertainties of contemporary social life as irreverent and immoral.

In this gospel song, the *nthukî ncabûka* are identified with the formation of a public ethos where social rôles have been subverted by 'love of money' and irreverance for established moral codes. All of the positions and points in the life-course are inverted and distorted. The crises of political authority and the power of elders to control the identity of others are represented as a moral failure: elders sleep with girls young enough to be their daughters; and grandmums, trying to be girls, appear ridiculous in sunglasses and hair-curlers. Accusations of age-based incest and other inter-personal transgressions, such as not acting one's age or flaunting one's personality, are flung as direct attacks on the people of today. Young people, like their

boundless elders, are represented as beyond subjection by others and, hence, morally adrift in the influence of the Devil.

What is striking in Akwalû's lyrics is his capacity to meld indigenous narratives with biblical scripture about the 'coming of a last generation.' Indeed, interpretively, there are no grounds to separate them. Entanglements of ideas drawn from local allegories about the coming of a last generation and the prophesies in the Biblical scriptures about the End of Days lend the artist a powerful public workshop in which to underscore his social criticism with a vision of redemption. In terms of what I may call a Meru epistemology, the body of Kîmeru narrative and allegory are not perceived to contradict popular understandings of the Bible, particularly those which profess (*ûroria*) a second coming. The central place of returns in both Christian and Kîmerû eschatologies is taken locally as the prophetic truth of both. Allegories of a 'last generation' (*nthukî cîa mûthia*, literally tailing generation) were an integral part of indigenous eschatology in the dialectic of *gîtîba* (see Chapter Two). A brief mention of the 'age-class with bells on their ears' (*îrwa nthukî îrîa ncabûka rwîîna ntuara matû*) is an idiomatic reference to narratives which foretold (*kûrorua*, to divine) of a generation being born with eight ears (*îkirwe nthukî na matû yanaana*). A common narrative, the end of the world is brought on by a generation which has eight ears, dresses in bizarre fashions, commits age-based incest and kills its parents. In fieldwork, several versions of this story about 'the generation with eight ears' were heard, as presented earlier. In brief, this is an allegorical tale about the end of community. The 'generation with eight ears' (*nthukî na matû yanaana*) are the youthful harbingers of so much cultural loss and social chaos. In one version, because these young people listen to so many voices, they become so distracted that they hear nothing of what others - in this case their elders - tell them. As a Miriti informant told

me, "Look at us now with all these radios and televisions! And the elders are saying that we don't listen, like a generation with eight ears." New tastes in clothing and concerns for personal 'style', or fashion, also weave their way into the description of the generation with 'eight ears', who dress bizzarely, but it is not clear whether this imagination comes from the old stories, or whether this has been a recent modification upon the old theme.

In the narratives, not only do the *nthukî na matû yanaana* refuse to listen to their elders, but they also begin to break the rules defining incest. The imperative to keep the social rules and principles surrounding reproduction in order is one of the allegorical strands of this story. Unlistening and oblivious to rebuke, the community commits heinously immoral acts such as sleeping with their mothers and daughters or fathers and sons. In another version, the bells on their ears make so much noise that intelligible discourse becomes futile. Noise making is always considered vulgar and impolite against the internalised ideal of *nthoni*. Where one's *ntuara* (cow bells) are obtrusively loud, the meaning is that one is deemed arrogant, a loud-mouth and immune to the suggestions of others. In public meetings, such as *baraza* or co-operative society meetings, persons speaking out of turn, or in an offensive way, are frequently rebuked by calls of "*karaga nthoni!*" (stay quiet, but colloquially 'have you no shame?'). Speaking of someone's bells is a reference to how discrete they manage to remain in a context of eager gossipers. That the 'bells' of the 'last generation' may be heard, indicates the existence of a well-heeled perception that there is less decency or self-respect in the present than there was in the past. As grasped in the English concept of 'shame', itself a painful emotion which strips away one's social esteem, the problem with the 'generation with bells on their ears' is that they have no shame (*nthukî ncabûka îjî batîna ûthoni*), that is to say that they take no heed

of the importance of 'shyness' or civility.

Circumcision songs are frequently disconnected from any sense of nostalgia and used in contexts where social actors fall into conflicting rôles. During the political campaigns leading up to the 2003 general elections, parties of lobbyists called upon such songs to discredit their political opponents. Similarly, Akwalû evokes Kîmerû dances (*kwina*, to sing and dance) to emphasise their power to express age and generationally based antagonism. Although, today, *marîrî*, *ngûrî*, and *kîrarîre* are considered by some people to be anachronisms, at ceremonial events they are a part of the ludic and celebratory process through which successive age-classes are formed. In his denunciation of the moral conduct of contemporary social actors, Akwalû juxtaposes the propriety of dances like *marîrî*, *ngûrî*, and *kîrarîre* to a 'modernity' which is both sinful and without ceremony. It is the banality of the present which renders it impotent against immorality. The agitation and outrage of popular gospel music, evangelically active in exposing the 'sin' (*meeyia*) of 'modernity' is likened to *marîrî*, *ngûrî*, and *kîrarîre* because these dance forms provided a social context where the intersubjectivity of age cohorts could be used as a critique of the relationship between parental, adjacent, and filial generations. *Kîrarîre*, for example, was sung by young and emerging warriors to shame older warriors into acquiescing to their demands that they 'retire' from warriorhood. Through singing *kîrarîre*, these younger men agitated their slightly older counterparts with song and dance, humiliating the warriors still living as bachelor-warriors. The moral content of circumcision songs was stressed as one way of showing others that one's age-class were mature enough to advance themselves to the status of warriorhood. An older warrior's illegitimate children could be publically exposed, bringing the individual great personal loss of esteem. This was a threat for him to finally leave the *gaarû* and make room for the formation of a younger

age-class. This dance form was a poignant form of symbolic lobbying, because it publically named individuals for having impregnating uninitiated girls and announced acts of individual cowardice which would negatively portray the whole older grouping. Of course, however, Akwalû would not have experienced this dance-song in his lifetime as described above and as expressed in his own lyrics, but its evocation clearly demonstrates the meaning which continues to linger in Akwalû's choice of iconic or anachronistic words.

Another popular song by Akwalû, 'A Parent's Blessing' (*Kîrathimo kîa Mûcîari*), expresses further misgivings and disquiet about the attitude of youth towards their parents. The concept of *kîrathimo*, blessings from a person, is grounded in age differences because an older person may either bless or curse those younger than he or she:

Mûcoore menyagîra rîrîa akwaaria îî
 My friend, beware when you speak
Ûtîkîîje kûrûmwa nî mûcîari îî
 To avoid a parent's curse
Nîkaaba waage ûtonga na waage nkuma îî
 It's better you've no wealth and no fame
Nûjûkie kîtharimo kîa mûcîari îî
 And you've got a parent's blessings

Throughout Kenya, a parent's curse is considered to be the strongest and virulent of sanctions upon the actions of offspring. In some contexts, it may be seen as a sort of psychic violence brought on by the child's insolence towards their parents.

Earlier, in the 1970s, reknowned folksinger Kathuma Gîtonga sang of Kîbaabu and Gîchunge's moral experiences of modernity. In one song, *Cabacû*, Kathuma sings about his age-mates' itinerant sense of direction, getting 'mixed up' (*gûcabacû*) with drinking alcohol and sexual activities. Playing on the saying, "there is disarray in the clan gathering" (*'kwîîina mûcabacano mûcemanîone'*), Kathuma laments the moral crises of his present in the chorus of this song:

*Kûrukû mantû okûrûka
Cabacû mantû cabanca
ja matû jakîrega gûtûrwa*

By-gone things have become
mixed up, things are bad
like they refuse to have ears pierced

The body is a focus of many of Kathuma's folksongs. The reference to pierced ears is an unmistakable idiom for the elders of his day. By the late 1990s fewer and fewer elders had the pierced and elongated ear lobes (*gûtûra matû*). Such ears are an embodied symbol of how people's subjectivities have changed. To some, these bodily features of the elders are the brunt of insensitive jokes and several elders I encountered expressed a mild embarrassment that people did not understand why they shaped their ears in this way. M'Mûramba, a Mîcûbû *ndiguri* from Giithû, Tigania, flashed with anger, once, when he told me, "These youngsters are saying things will be better when all the old people with pierced ears pass on... old men like me!" An Imenti woman I knew, had her ears sown back up sometime in the 1950s, so that she would look like what she thought a Christian should look like. In Tigania, large numbers of the Mîcûbû and their Mûkûba wives acquired the nickname *Nkunja ûtû* (fold the ears) because they wanted to appear 'modern.' Yet, Kathuma's praise of the past (he himself was born after people stopped piercing the ears of children) may be taken with a larger anxiety about the social, moral, and economic transformations of the Meru countryside experienced in the 1960s.

The figures at the heart of Kathuma's lyrical anxiety are young women and especially their bodies. Like Akwalû's description of today's fashion, the slitted and short skirts cited above, Kathuma condemns girls' expression of their sexuality through their choice of clothing in the late 1960s. In numerous photo albums presented to me when visiting the houses of now middle-aged women, I came across faded black-

and-white prints of them wearing mini-skirts, open shoes, and long hair as young girls. I would joke with my informants that my mother, a Glaswegian teenager in the 1960s, had dressed in almost the same fashion. To the political imaginary of the 'tribal' past, however, women's sexuality and their bodies represented a threat to the moral order that had been established under late colonialism. This singer's nostalgia for an imaginary, moral past, in another song, berates the wearing of sandals and mini-skirts by the 'sisters' of his generation, explicated in the song *Mwarî wa Ciokairuthi*.

*Mwarocîa Kairuthi, mwarocîa Kairuthi... gwe mwarî...
 Nîatîa bûkûgiita?, nîatîa bûkûgiita?... gwe mwarî...
 Bwenyangîa Merû, bwenyangîa Merû... gwe mwarî...
 Bwekîra 'tight', bwekîra 'tight'... gwe mwarî...
 Nairatû bîa 'sandal', nairatû bîa 'sandal'... gwe mwarî...
 Mwarocîa Kairuthi, mwarocîa Kairuthi... gwe mwarî...*

My sister Kairuthi, my sister Kairuthi... you girl
 What are you up to?, what are you up to?... you girl
 You've destroyed Meru, you've destroyed Meru... you girl
 You've worn tights, you've worn tights... you girl
 And sandal shoes, and sandal shoes... you girl
 My sister Kairuthi, my sister Kairuthi... you girl

It is tempting to interpret this popular music as a new form of oral artistry, within which a critique of modernity is embedded. But, it is not clear whether the personhood of the recording artist as social critic is formed through a clear division between 'tradition' and 'modernity.' Kathuma sings about educating one's parents to count to three in English, the language of development, just as he sings about how his age-class has become lost in its exuberance for things new and naughty. Is it even necessary to beg the separation of these seemingly polar kinds of histories?

Indeed, these songs represent the creation of a vernacular modernity, particularly through the localised transformation of Biblical images and metaphors. The Igembe singer Kîbara, from Ntonyiri, incensed by the crises of morality witnessed in the Nyambenes, contests the idea that 'development' and 'modernisation' have led

people towards a better life (cf. Karp 2002: 82-104). In his song, *Kidawa*, Kîbara points out people's hypocrisies in their understandings of 'development', 'modernity' and 'religion' through metaphors drawn from the Bible:

*Úthungîri twauga jau nî maendeleo
Inya ûrebi nabuo nî maendeleo najo!
Kathî nî maendeleo jau nî ja Jehoram
Kidawa itû wîrîre na wonoke buru!*

They're calling adultery development
Even drunkenness, this is called development too!
These are developments for Jehoram's eternal fire
Kidawa please repent and be fully saved!

This particular song demonstrates an interesting lack of constraint in Kîbara's interpretation of the Old Testament, especially Kings (*Anene*), where Jehoram is briefly mentioned in a power struggle with the kingdoms of the Moab. Problems of translation are hardly moot, here, but the links made between *maendeleo* (development) and the vices of sex and drinking, have a rather thinly stretched relation with the story of Jehoram's downfall in the Bible. Writing about Ewe interpretations of the Bible, Birgit Meyer (1999) argues that 'the Book' often figures as a pretext for the imagination, a source of authority, from which scattered images and metaphors may be used to provide 'a clarity and certainty that the biblical text itself lacks' (Meyer 1999: 36). In their hermeneutic readings of the Bible, Ewe reconstruct the biblical meanings through their own allegorical interpretations (*ibid*). In Kîmerû popular music, song lyrics drawn from the 'gospel' exhibit a similar play on form and meaning.

Exegesis and allegorical interpretation in Meru

Deborah Madsen's (1996) discussion of allegory in the construction of

America as a 'redeemer nation', from the time of the Puritan colonists to postmodern literary criticism, strikes a resonant chord with allegory as a method of interpretation and a narrative genre among the Meru in the twentieth century. Highlighting allegory as both a 'rhetoric of dissent' as well as the 'voice of orthodoxy' in America's political and spiritual imagination, Madsen traces how allegorical narratives are often produced in particular conjunctures of social and cultural crisis:

[A]llegory has been the privileged form to which successive generations of American writers have turned in times of particular uncertainty and tension because allegory is, fundamentally, an indeterminate literary form. The essential indeterminacy of reference that characterises allegorical interpretation and allegorical narratives lends to allegory the kind of flexibility needed to respond to the vicissitudes of cultural history. Allegory comes into its own during periods of uncertainty regarding the nature of communication, the reliability of language and the authenticity of culturally important texts because allegory is, above all, focused upon the complexities and difficulties inherent in the activity of interpretation (Madsen 1996: 4).

The commercial possibilities notwithstanding, contemporary Meru recording artists are working within an allegorical genre, drawing upon the orthodoxy of 'traditional' narrative to creatively subvert, or dissent from, the dominant ideas of a teleologically 'modern' future. These are creative stories in which both Christian faith in salvation and secular expectations of development are in tension with an unachievable vision of the community's redemption. Allegorical modes of telling these stories are effective because, as Jon Whitman (1987) phrases it, 'allegory turns its head in one direction, but turns its eyes in another... it says one thing, and means another' (Whitman 1987: 2). In Kîmerû, allegories of the 'bad' generation contribute to a vision of Meru cultural history as recursive and resilient, but not without its dissent and malcontent. The allegory of the coming of the last generation, with bells on its ears, is an anxious and indeterminate metaphor for the end of community. The rhetorical position of the *nthukî ncabûka* is not about the immorality of specific and contemporary young

generations, but about the ineluctable difficulties of social and cultural crises and transitions *per se*. And, critically, the allegorical interpretation of a mythic, pure past amply contributes to an ideology of history which glosses over 'bad' histories and makes the most of 'good' histories, forgetting the former and celebrating the latter. Because they cannot efface the pervasive sense of crisis into which local people find themselves entangled, gospel music makes use of 'tradition' and 'modernity' to steer a meaningful path through the community's aporia. Meru gospel and folk musicians' written lyrics provide the Meru public the possibility to create a counter-history which does not relinquish the idea of a 'golden age' before the white man came (*indira gûkîja bantune*), nor give up faith in the Biblical second-coming of Christ and personal salvation. Perhaps more importantly, however, such rhetorical uses of history suggest that crisis, suffering, struggle, and uncertainty all have some redemptive value among the Meru, thereby supporting a hope and expectation that development will eventually occur in this part of the world.

Epilogue:

'When the Dust Settles': Historicity and uncertainty

Some weeks before completing this thesis, I received an email from a friend in Mikinduri. This was John Lemi, a primary school teacher and aspiring novelist who had sent me a draft chapter of his new book for review. One statement, in particular, startled me. He wrote in the free manner of email:

“Before I met you I dint know how important the age group factor was/ was- to African Natives. But slowly by slowly itz materializing in me.”

It was an important moment of clarification. I had never really consulted Lemi as I did with other Meru about their age-classes and the historicity of generation. Did I ‘invent’ this ethnography I had just written? Were all those who criticised me for being narrowly interested in ‘tradition’ correct? Were those authors using the metaphors of collapse and erosion describing real and actual conditions on the ground? Did my ethnography distort the way things were played out to me during fieldwork in Meru? Or, had my attention been drawn to something which was there, but hidden from the view of those not participating directly in its social drama?

Reconciling myself, I thought about John Lemi’s life and his aspirations. Educated at university and comfortable in the city as well as the country, Lemi spends his spare time writing novels which are set in a magico-realist past. In short, Lemi writes about the absurdities and ironies of life on the margins of ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity.’ A recent example of his work told a story about struggling to make a living in Mikinduri from the point of view of a donkey. In his fiction, Lemi uses

history selectively and to make a point which is emplotted into his arrangement of characters, the fields of their drama, and the moral overlay he inscribes in his words. His latest works defy realist historiography, but that's not his concern. When he mentioned how age-classes were 'materialising' in him, while using the now internalised colonial category of 'African Natives', I thought about 'invention', inventiveness, renewal, and the implications of historical entanglements upon the thinking and actions of future generations. I thought about point of view and position in assessing different kinds of social, cultural, and historical entanglements. But through Lemi's comment, I also had moment to pause and reflect on some of the defects with arguments which share family resemblances with the 'invention of tradition' thesis.

One such element might be rephrased as the 'concealment of tradition.' Lemi's comment forced me to think about the ways in which knowledge about age-class formation is concealed from some actors, before it 'materialises' in them because it gains salience it formerly and subjectively did not have before. I think this notion of knowledge materialising within someone, as a novel subjective experience, is a fascinating proposition. It is like Gadamer's notion of a horizon. It links into much of social anthropology's insights into the ritual process and its effects upon personhood, identity, and relatedness. Although Lemi underwent the necessary life passages through circumcision, in the Kîmerû style, the idea that 'traditional' knowledge could have been hidden from him strengthens the argument made by Paul Spencer (1990) that the power of ritual knowledge specialists lies in their control over esoterica and secrets. But there was also something else going on which suggests that in times of crisis and historical transition there are choices to be made about either keeping secrets or exposing them. In Meru, as it was in the late 1990s and early 2000s, many elements

of the age-grading and formation of age-classes which might have been shrouded in secrecy in former periods of time were made into tokens of public debate. The status of the community was at stake with the ageing of its eldest persons and the transition of ideals and expectations about the life-course among the young. Formerly guarded knowledges were suddenly revealed because the succession between the generations was viewed, not only as an inevitability, but as a moral necessity made all the more poignant in the present than in the past, because it had been stripped of the specific ritual contexts it formerly demanded.

Old women, convinced that their silence would be harmful, spoke of issues that would have been deemed inappropriate years earlier. Dozens of such older women told me about the crises of their youth, about their lost infants, of marriage to migrant men who were rarely at home, and of broken relations with their sons. In their ageing, they found voice to expose what they had previously repressed and kept silent. They spoke of broken chains of reciprocity and of injustice between the generations, not necessarily to affirm any vestige of control they had over their sons and daughters-in-law, but out of recognition that their ageing demanded they let go of it. In provoking debates about the extreme tensions of filial and parental relations and giving voice to what they had previously suffered in silence, these old women openly defined a space where issues and dramas which had previously been concealed could be made public. The vocabulary through which they exposed local dramas which effected them directly were the centrally organising idioms and tropes of age and generational difference.

Meanwhile, their husbands worried about their own ageing and the demands of their maturing sons. Succession became the issue of the day, but this time round, such men were in the position of relinquishing control over material and symbolic assets

and passing it on to younger men, rather than working together and lobbying as an age-class to acquire such things themselves. Having never been placed in such a social situation, there was much disagreement on how it should be done. *Njuri* elders could not agree on the specific rites to perform, but found consensus in the idea that they had to do something to make public their intentions to succeed decision-making power to their sons, however postponed by reasonable argument or deliberate footdragging. As such men aged, succession had already taken place on hundreds of individual farms and households but not writ large upon the political 'community.' I was perhaps only to get a glimpse of this drama, as it must have unfolded over many years, but this struggle amongst older men to redefine succession, through playing with ritual form, said much about the pliant and resilient features of the age and generational 'system' in channeling conflict towards predictable outcomes. Whatever *ad hoc* covenants and deliberations the elders made in secrecy, the very inventiveness of their debates about 'tradition' stemmed from the ways in which these unspecified ritual practices had been formerly concealed from them.

Among young people, elements of Meru's age-class and generational 'system' were materialising in other ways. Young women found voice in arguing for some kind of reinstatement of ritual process, however token, through a language of universal human rights. This was much more than a case of getting new clothing. It went much further into the liminal nature of many contemporary girls' experiences, their lack of either 'traditional' or 'modern' standing, itself an outcome of many decades of debate about the dangers of female initiations. For quite a number of young women, the connections between the NGOs and the residues of women's initiatory lore presented an arena for reassessing their value as social beings. Their male counterparts, deeply divided through innovations made to their initiatory performances and the body, were

also unsure of what constituted the residual practices of male ritual. Some among them substituted the act of initiation and the creation of moral personhood with self-consciously regressive acts such as 'forced circumcisions', explicit denunciations of the language of universal human rights. What seemed to be happening in Meru during my fieldwork was that much of the importance of the age-class and generational 'system' was materialising in different persons not as a reification of tradition, but as a creative and pragmatic stance to their changing circumstances.

Although with caution, it has helped to think of Meru attitudes towards their age-class and generational 'system' through the metaphor of the underground stream which I evoked earlier. This metaphor ties in with the idea that 'tradition' can be concealed and the notion that 'tradition' can be called upon when historical conditions change. These ways of thinking about the formation of age-classes in Meru resonate with Victor Turner's conceptualisation of 'communitas', not especially when looked at within the observable ritual process, such as a 'cleansing' rite implicated in a particular generational succession, but within social dramas which carry on through historical time (cf. Turner 1974: 98-155). Turner's idea of *communitas* provokes thought about the making and unmaking of persons, often within very unequal or alienated relations to one another, but it can also be applied to larger social formations, including 'communities' which lie in unequal relations with others at a wider level of abstraction. The whole metaphor of modernisation as a kind of 'growth' from one stage of life to another is deeply embedded in contemporary Kîmerû thought about the transformations of their own society. It is also represented in Euroamerican ideas about 'progress' and 'development', such that its place in Kîmerû thought is probably an example of historical entanglement. It is worth taking a risk to suggest that in Kîmeru thought about historical change, the 'traditional' represents a phase of growth

where everything was structured and where everyone knew their place; but that the 'modern' represents an unfolding in liminal time and space where everything is disarticulate and nobody really knows their place. As simple an idea as this is, what prevailed during the specific period when I lived in Meru and undertook my ethnographic research were a series of historicised debates which sought to make use of such liminalities to reconstruct the notion of the Meru as a community.

Unlike other theoretical uses of the notion of *communitas*, however, it is not clear that I can rely upon the return to a re-structured condition in the case of contemporary age-class formation in Meru, as Turner's studies of the ritual process suggested. True enough, new social positions are being created in Meru all the time, and many of the ethnographic situations I have chosen to write about emphasise this, perhaps above other interpretive possibilities. But this 'communitas' among the contemporary Meru has the effect of providing some kind of interpretive arena around the irrevocable shifting of social positions occurring over generational time. As such, new vocabularies and metaphors are created to name this reordering and reassessment of Meru models of the life-course, such that 'mixing', *bûrukû*, and 'Swahili' become meaningful new concepts within the familiarity of old forms.

By drawing attention to how social knowledge 'materialises' in the context of new situations, Lemi provided me with an insight into the ageing process as experienced in a 'society' which makes young men, then women, into moral persons through their inclusion in an age-class. Rather than being captured by an 'age organisation' or 'generational system', those who experience the formation of an age-class in Meru do so as very active participants. Of course, like in any arena of social life, some people are more active than others. If today's young people, for example, did nothing about organising the rituals through which they recreate themselves, then

we would have the ethnographic context to agree with other ethnographers of East African societies that such forms of life have indeed become defunct. Instead, however, the formation of age-classes among the Meru continues to materialise because such ritual contexts provide an arena for interpreting the contemporary challenges of local social life.

It is relatively easy to understand why generations of ethnographers studying 'age-organisation' in East Africa have thought that these forms of life would 'disappear', 'erode', and 'collapse.' The crises they encountered in their ethnographic present and the debates about community such crises provoked were dutifully noted as empirical evidence of the instability of such 'systems' under the influences of modernisation (theory).⁵⁷ What such ethnographers perhaps did not note, however, was the specificity of the events and the processes they sought to describe, then theorise, as conditions preempting the disarray of age-class formation. They did not consider historicity as part of the 'field' in which they 'worked.' And, by historicity, I do not mean that ethnographers of these generations did not consider history, this charge being an inaccurate summary of the situation then (cf. Lewis 1999; Goody 1995). Rather, they perhaps did not think it appropriate to reflect, at length, on the interplay between the theoretical vogues occurring in the academic seminar, the historical circumstances underlying their fieldwork experience, and the effects the debates of the people they 'studied' had upon the kinds of ethnography they eventually wrote. Often the disadvantages of the ethnographic present, its historical myopia, prohibit greater and wider appreciations of historicity upon the creation of

⁵⁷ It should be noted that the expansion of structural-functionalist studies about kinship, especially segmentary lineages in Africa, such as those which contributed to *African Political Systems*, perhaps ingrained the idea of age-organisation as being less stable than the lineage model of social organisation. Although theoretically moot today, I still think the eclipse of thinking specifically about the interrelations of age and gender in this earlier period of social anthropology has had an impact on how 'age systems' have been conceptualised and written about since.

anthropological theories. One sees little evidence of continuity because of the historical uncertainties into which one is cast. Theoretical concerns which are the preoccupation of a particular year or decade may outweigh ethnographic concerns which pertain to a specific social drama of much longer duration and of greater historical consequence. Faced with the historical uncertainties, the ethnographer reconstructs the past from the 'evidence' gleaned in the 'here and now' of fieldwork. In order to grasp the significance of precedent happenings which 'shed light' on the social drama occurring during fieldwork, the past is reconstructed through knowledge of the changing 'social structure' of the people or peoples in question. The structural metaphors notwithstanding, without a historical method and perspective on age-class formation it becomes impossible to understand why social structure (that bugbear of a word) remains necessary to anthropological theory on the subject. Because the study of age-class formation has to do with time and the making and unmaking of persons over the life-course it has much to do with understanding, as Victor Turner put it, a structure of positions or the passing of an 'interstructural situation' (Turner 1967: 93). But I have not necessarily written about structure as if it were analytically primary to an understanding of Meru age-class formation and the historicity of generation.

What I have attempted to do here is argue for the idea of social and cultural transcontinuities, while still engaging with the deconstructionist arguments in vogue over the past two decades. Anthropologists now question the axiomatic status of concepts of 'culture' and 'society.' As Nigel Rapport frames the question, 'Is it not the always the case that cultural communities are arenas of interpretation - even if presented rhetorically, by leaders and representatives, to insiders and outsiders alike, as matters of traditional doctrine and practice?' (Rapport 2003: 381). But cultural

communities, by this definition, are also formed out of debates about 'society', such that we are able to identify the binding forms of community in terms of contest and argument. In this sense, neither 'culture' and 'society' are constructs worth examining outside of their historical specificity. Important to my argument is an insistence that our analyses of age-classes, or even the life-course, are dependent upon the historicity of the situation in which they are studied, its confluences, ideas, and politics. A recognition of this strengthens the kind of anthropology we write.

As Ioan Lewis suggests for the anthropology of local political histories, 'Much debate in anthropology about the 'nature' of a particular cultural system often seems an artefact of studies of the same 'system' at different points of time' (Lewis 1999: 22). Writing about the subject of historical change and East African 'age-systems' more specifically, Paul Spencer (1999) notes that the changes which these forms of life have undergone continually pose a methodological problem to the advancement of theory production in anthropology. Disentangling historical shifts from recurrent phases of age-class formation, as Spencer correctly states, is thwarted by the *trompe d'œil* when 'direct observation by the visiting anthropologist amounts to little more than a passing glimpse' (Spencer 1997: 127). While the views of Paul Spencer are not endorsed without question, his recognition of changing points of view on 'traditional' knowledge among his elder Maasai informants, once *moran* when Spencer carried out his first fieldwork in Kenya in the late 1950s, is an important new contribution to theoretical reflections on age organisation in East Africa. That these elders 'assumed a licence to reinterpret the rules in response to new circumstances as *they* saw necessary' resolves some of the structural-functionalist trappings of ethnography written about these situations (Spencer 1997: 128). What Spencer does not stress with equal enthusiasm, however, is that these elders' changing points of view and power to

'reinterpret the rules' within novel historical situations come to them, 'materialise' one might say, from quite specific situations related to their own ageing process which, historically, has been a drama in progress since their age-class was formed as such. To some degree, much of the 'traditional' knowledge which they conceal from others, would be of highly idiosyncratic significance. This is especially the case where different generations lead lives characterised by filial and parental avoidance. For a contrasting example, the dramas of young women over key debates about their own initiations may ultimately have, in their own peculiar historical circumstances, more impact on shaping the Maasai as a community of argument than the elders' power to transform 'tradition' as they feel necessary. In communities highly stratified and differentiated by age and gender, such as Spencer's Maasai, the historically salient reasons why one group of people are attributed with having changed something often do not necessarily prove the validity of anthropological theories which equate the 'licence' to change the rules with a vague notion of power held in the hands of the most mature. This sense of licence captures the very 'nature' of age-class formation which, as Lewis points out clearly, is more often reflective of how the 'system' was interpreted by outsiders at any given period of time than demonstrative of its inherent, structural qualities.

In conclusion, it needs to be stressed that I cannot write myself out of this debate which took place in Meru in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Like Peristiany in 1933, during his Kipsigis fieldwork, the ethnographer is compelled to enter these kinds of debates on some level, even instigate them on occasion. My discussions with hundreds of Meru contributed to revisioning social dramas which were many decades in formation. Sometimes, I drew the rebuke of people who felt that I was talking about something which was either embarrassing to them or which was felt to grossly

misrepresent the 'modern' forms of personhood they upheld. Others found my research an ideal venue to discuss matters which were clearly important to them, outlining in which ways they felt alienated from either 'traditional' or 'modern' forms of life. In the end, of course, I am aware that the worlds of the 'traditional' and 'modern' are fused, any separation of the two merely an artifice and a tool to speak about social life in a rhetorically meaningful way. In my future research, of which I am uncertain of, perhaps I will sort through the maze of differing perspectives about Meru age-class formations to offer new possibilities for looking at these forms of life and structures of feeling as part of a larger theoretical project on the politics of maturation. Perhaps I will return without this theoretical project and listen to how the local debates have transformed, as all of its protagonists get older, fill new shoes, or pass away into the underground stream. History will be important then, as it has been in this thesis, but I am aware that the point of view presented here will be a moment in time and understanding quite apart from that which may, or may not, occur in any future sojourn to Meru, Kenya. One always hopes that the dust can settle so that one's understandings can attain greater clarity. This metaphor has arisen before in anthropological thinking about history. Evans-Pritchard viewed the place of historical data in social anthropology as a 'dust settling' effect (quoted in Lewis 1999), where the significance of events and situations happening in the ethnographic present are only grasped once this moment has passed and we have been allowed to take stock of the deeper past of the events or situations in question. I certainly stirred up a lot of dust with people in Meru through my research on the historicity of generation. I think, without introducing too much more distortion, this is what John Lemi meant when he said that knowledge of age-classes was materialising in him.

Appendix A

Kîmerû and Kiswahili Glossary

Kîmerû

<i>aba</i>	'my father', used in respect for all older males
<i>akûrû</i>	elders, older married men (sing. <i>mûkûrû</i>)
<i>antûbantene</i>	ancestors, people of the past, ancients
<i>arorî</i>	the prophets, seers (sing. <i>mûrorî</i>)
<i>athomî</i>	the first mission school students, literally 'readers' (sing. <i>mûthomî</i>)
<i>baite</i>	kin term for sister's son, by mother's brother (see <i>mûntûetû</i>)
<i>baîthe</i>	kin term for 'my father's people' (see <i>bantîî</i>)
<i>bamû</i>	reference between age-mates (see <i>bamûngo</i>)
<i>bankirû</i>	love relation reserved for elders whose children have all been initiated
<i>bate</i>	kin term for any very young child in one's clan
<i>batîrî</i>	Catholic priest, derived from Italian padre
<i>beethe ba mûthenya</i>	the 'daylight fathers', sponsors to a junior age-class
<i>beethe ba nthî</i>	the 'father of the country', ruling elders (see <i>eene ba nthî</i>)
<i>bibii</i>	'chewing gum', nickname of Lubeeta
<i>bûrukû</i>	term for a person without an age-class or circumcision group
<i>chankanabiri</i>	largest and most senior Imenti circumcision class (arch.)
<i>eekanga</i>	dry and hot season from January to February
<i>eene ba nthî</i>	the 'owners of the country', ruling elders (see <i>beethe ba nthî</i>)
<i>gaarû</i>	(a) warrior's barracks; (b) man's house
<i>gatego</i>	gonorrhoea
<i>gîcîaro</i>	cross-clan affiliation, 'blood brotherhood', adoption
<i>gîtîba</i>	(a) a generation alteration; (b) a 'century' or period of historical time
<i>gîtonga</i>	a wealthy man, a rich person
<i>gûcabacû</i>	to become 'mixed up', as in confused or in disarray
<i>gûcabûka</i>	to 'leak', to deviate or be immoral (see <i>nthukî ncabûka</i>)
<i>gûcwa ngûgi</i>	to look for work, labour migration
<i>gûkumbukia ng'ondû</i>	cleansing rite involving slaughter of sheep
<i>gûtaana</i>	to be cut, circumcised (boys)
<i>gûtaanithua</i>	to be cut, excised (girls)
<i>gûtûra matû</i>	ear piercing
<i>gûtûranyumba</i>	'coming out' ceremony for new initiates
<i>gûtûrûka gaarû</i>	generational succession, taking over of warriorhood (see <i>ntwiko</i>)

<i>gwîta kîoro</i>	compulsory labour in early colonial period (see <i>gwîta Ncomba</i>)
<i>gwîta Ncomba</i>	'to go to the coast', labour migration (see <i>gûcwa ngûgi</i> , <i>gwîta kîoro</i>)
<i>igîi</i>	men considered to be sexually polluted and immoral
<i>îgiita</i>	an unspecified period of time
<i>inya</i>	strength, power, volition
<i>iira</i>	white soda pigment used for bodily decoration
<i>îrundu</i>	a shade, a spirit
<i>jûûjû</i>	grandparent, usually 'grandmother' (see <i>ujuwe</i>)
<i>kaaria</i>	elder women's council, eclipsed during colonialism
<i>kaborio</i>	Government Chiefs, literally 'the ropes'
<i>kalingî nthenge</i>	scapegoat, usually a child who takes punishment for another kinsman
<i>kathingiriti</i>	a council of uncircumcised lads (see <i>nciibî</i> and <i>luungî</i>)
<i>kenda ya mûtaani</i>	the first nine initiates chosen from specified clans during circumcision
<i>kîama</i>	a council, usually presiding over a territorial or clan section
<i>kîamotha</i>	beginning stage of entering <i>njuri nceke</i> , <i>kîama ka otha</i>
<i>kîara</i>	a midden, usually within homestead compound
<i>Kîaramûû</i>	Famine of 1918-1919, literally 'Scorching Sun'
<i>kîene</i>	a circumcision field
<i>kiingo</i>	a distinct agricultural season, e.g. <i>kiingo gîa ûthima</i> (short rains)
<i>kîmûtû</i>	maize meal flour, name of famine in 1969
<i>kîrarîre</i>	songs of praise and critique sung by warriors at succession period
<i>kîrathimo</i>	blessings bestowed by an older person to a younger
<i>Kîrianduara</i>	famine of 1922, literally 'Eating Leather Skins'
<i>kîringa ndebe</i>	to 'beat the drum', or commit generationally based incest
<i>kîroge</i>	(a) a scapel; (b) derogatory term for boys circumcised in a clinic
<i>Kîrugi</i>	'Cook', nickname of Kîruja labour migrants in 1930s
<i>kîruume</i>	a curse, proclaimed publically
<i>kîthiiri</i>	juridical council of elders
<i>kobia</i>	the second rung circumcision set (see <i>ndinguri</i> , <i>kabeeria</i>)
<i>kûbungira</i>	clan or family based incest (see <i>mwonkaranua</i>)
<i>kûingua riika</i>	period when no circumcisions take place, literally 'closed period'
<i>kûlaana</i>	to curse
<i>kûnenkanira thiirû</i>	declaration of a generational succession period
<i>kûorîa kîruume</i>	public cleansing of a curse (see <i>kîruume</i>)
<i>kûorîa mburî</i>	public cleansing through the slaughter of a goat
<i>kûrûthia</i>	to graze or pasture livestock
<i>kûrîria</i>	parade of would-be initiates visiting the houses of their kin
<i>kûromba njîra</i>	to ask permission to do something

<i>kûrorua</i>	to 'foresee', divine or even prophesise
<i>kûthamia</i>	to move house
<i>kûthinjanua</i>	ritual performed to remove taint from clan-alliance incest
<i>kwoutha</i>	a circumcision dance
<i>kwora nkoro</i>	clear throat, to announce approach as a warrior
<i>laing'o</i>	a warrior of great reknown, also member of <i>lamalla</i>
<i>lamalla</i>	the warriors' council (arch. + Kîimenti, <i>ramare</i>)
<i>libwî</i>	a dance of neighbouring children held at evenings
<i>luungî</i>	a council of uncircumcised lads, meaning 'lungs' (see <i>kathingiriti</i>)
<i>macembe</i>	forked hoe, <i>jembe</i> in Swahili (sing. <i>ncembe</i>)
<i>maganjo</i>	ruins of a homestead
<i>maitha</i>	enemies, raiders, outsiders (sing. <i>mûnthû</i>)
<i>makethî ja mûtaani</i>	the circumcision fee, literally the 'circumcisor's gain/harvest'
<i>maria</i>	syphilis
<i>marîrî</i>	a dance performed by warriors or young men (see <i>ngûrî</i>)
<i>marwa</i>	fermented millet beer
<i>mataana</i>	the circumcision classes (sing. <i>îtaana</i>)
<i>mbithi</i>	raw, unripe, or immature
<i>meeyia</i>	Christian concept of sin
<i>mûciârî</i>	a parent (pl. <i>aciârî</i>)
<i>mûciî</i>	(a) lineage; (b) a house or home
<i>mûciere</i>	a parturient young woman, a wife
<i>mûgaa</i>	a herbalist, ritual cleanser, 'witchdoctor' (pl. <i>agaa</i>)
<i>mûgiro</i>	pollution, state of impurity often causing illnesses (pl. <i>mîgiro</i>)
<i>mûgwatî</i>	an initiate's sponsor, a minder (pl. <i>agwatî</i>)
<i>mûgwe</i>	ritual leadership (see <i>mûkîama</i>)
<i>mûkîama</i>	the representative, rain maker, ritual leadership (see <i>mûgwe</i>)
<i>mûkingo</i>	HIV/AIDS, derived from Kîkuyu (see <i>mûtheera</i>)
<i>mûntû</i>	a person (pl. <i>antû</i>)
<i>mûntûetû</i>	mother's brother, literally 'our man'
<i>mûnyaya</i>	a friend, a lover
<i>mûramû</i>	men circumcised together and who form a bond partnership
<i>mûrume</i>	a married man
<i>mûthanduku</i>	small-pox
<i>mûtheega</i>	a charm or medicine for protection from pollution, sorcery, illness
<i>mûtheera</i>	(a) ancient sexually transmitted disease; (b) HIV/AIDS (see <i>mûkingo</i>)
<i>mûtongeerî</i>	a spokesperson charged with 'protecting' the public interest
<i>mûtûûrîre</i>	'nurture' or living together
<i>mpaara</i>	drought, famine or hunger
<i>mwariikî</i>	eldest ritual experts (see <i>ntindiri</i>)

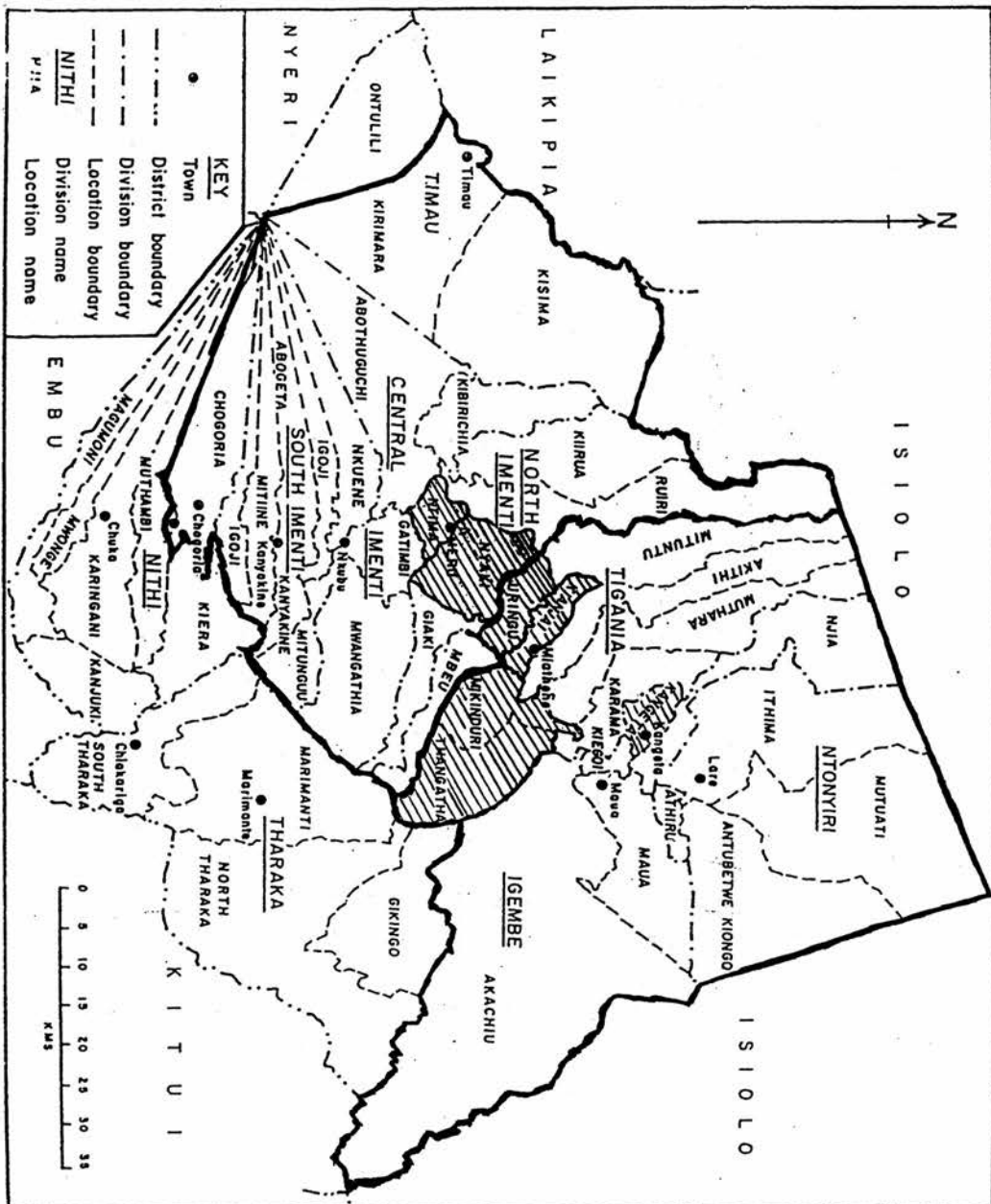
<i>mwekûrû</i>	an older woman, a wife
<i>mwene</i>	a household head, an 'owner' or elder man
<i>mwijî</i>	an uncircumcised boy (pl. <i>bwijî</i>)
<i>mwîjukia</i>	a midwife, the 'receiver' of a baby (pl. <i>eejukia</i>)
<i>mwingo</i>	'binding' laws or covenant
<i>mwîriiga</i>	(a) clan and territory; (b) gate to homestead
<i>mwongela</i>	'additions' of initiates to an age-class (see <i>nangitîa</i>)
<i>mwonkaranua</i>	incest between people of clans affiliated by <i>gîciaro</i> (see <i>kûbungira</i>)
<i>mwûthi</i>	board and counter game, often called <i>mbao</i>
<i>naincû</i>	(a) honey; (b) hydromel or mead drink (see <i>uki</i>)
<i>nangitîa</i>	'laggards' or over- and under- aged in age-class for Imenti (see <i>mwongela</i>)
<i>ncamba</i>	a hero, usually in terms of martial quality or reputation
<i>nceege</i>	a 'porcupine', or an outcast
<i>nciibî</i>	a council of uncircumcised lads (see <i>kathingiriti</i> and <i>luungî</i>)
<i>ndegwa</i>	a bull
<i>ndegwa ya nthuki</i>	the gift bull, 'bull of reconciliation' given between rival age-classes
<i>ndinguri</i>	the most senior circumcision class in any <i>îtaana</i> (see <i>kobia</i> , <i>kabeeria</i>)
<i>ngiranî</i>	endogamous, 'unmarriageable' clan of 'abominable' women
<i>ngoa</i>	the jealousy or rivalry of groups of people (see <i>rûriitho</i>)
<i>ng'ondû</i>	sheep, often in ritual context
<i>ngûgi</i>	work or labour
<i>ngûrî</i>	wrestling matches performed by uncircumcised boys
<i>ngutu</i>	an excised girl, a 'maiden'
<i>nguû ntuune</i>	the 'red clothes', non-Africans in precolonial prophecies
<i>nkîa</i>	an 'orphan' or a client
<i>nkûrû</i>	elder, older than
<i>njîra</i>	(a) a road or passage way; (b) intentions within one's life time
<i>njuno</i>	a pithy saying or proverb
<i>njuri îmbere</i>	the most élite level of <i>njuri</i> proceedings
<i>njuri îmbîngere</i>	an élite juridicial council in political hierarchy
<i>njuri nceke</i>	select council of elders
<i>nkenye</i>	an initiated girl, maidenhood (sing. <i>mûkenye</i>)
<i>nkoma</i>	a spirit being (from the Swahili) (see <i>îrundu</i>)
<i>nkurumbu</i>	degrogatory term for elder not a member of a council (see <i>ntîrîika</i>)
<i>nkûûlo</i>	abdominal scarification for initiated girls
<i>ntaanî</i>	a circumcised lad during initiation (see <i>gûtaana</i> , <i>gûtaanithua</i>)
<i>ntaliba</i>	term of respect for a girl's elders in mother's age-class (see <i>aba</i>)
<i>ntagu</i>	namesake between alternate generations

<i>ntindiri</i>	the one 'who waits', the eldest of the elders
<i>ntîrûka</i>	a wastrel, ne'er-do-well, elder of ill repute
<i>nthaka</i>	warriors (sing. <i>mûthaka</i>)
<i>nthoni</i>	(a) an in-law or affine; (b) quality of being 'shy' or respectful
<i>nthukî</i>	age-class, generation
<i>nthukî ncabûka</i>	a mannerless, immoral, or 'leaky' generation
<i>ntuara</i>	a cow-bell, euphemism for personal discretion
<i>ntûnkûri</i>	the masquerade in the 'burning' ceremony
<i>nturume</i>	a he-sheep, used in bridewealth
<i>ntûûra</i>	residential space, a village or cluster of homesteads
<i>ntwiko</i>	generational succession (see <i>gûtûrûka gaarû</i> and <i>kûnenkanira thiirû</i>)
<i>riika</i>	an age-class, age grouping (see <i>nthukî</i>)
<i>rûcîara</i>	a genealogical generation
<i>rûgambia</i>	(a) to initiate courtship; (b) to enter into marriage negotiations
<i>rûgono</i>	a story, narrative or allegory
<i>rûriitho</i>	personal envy or jealousy, literally the 'evil eye'
<i>thaano</i>	dry season from August to September
<i>ujuwe</i>	grandfather, as in 'my grandfather'
<i>uki</i>	(a) honey; (b) hydromel or mead drink (see <i>naincû</i>)
<i>ûramû</i>	bond partnership between age-mates, often betrothing their offspring
<i>ûritani bwa</i>	teaching of something specific
<i>ûroria</i>	the prophesies or dreams of soothsayer (see <i>arorî</i>)
<i>ûruura</i>	agricultural season from September to March
<i>wacîa</i>	an age-mate for boys circumcised together, literally 'my brother'
<i>wandindi</i>	a violin

Swahili

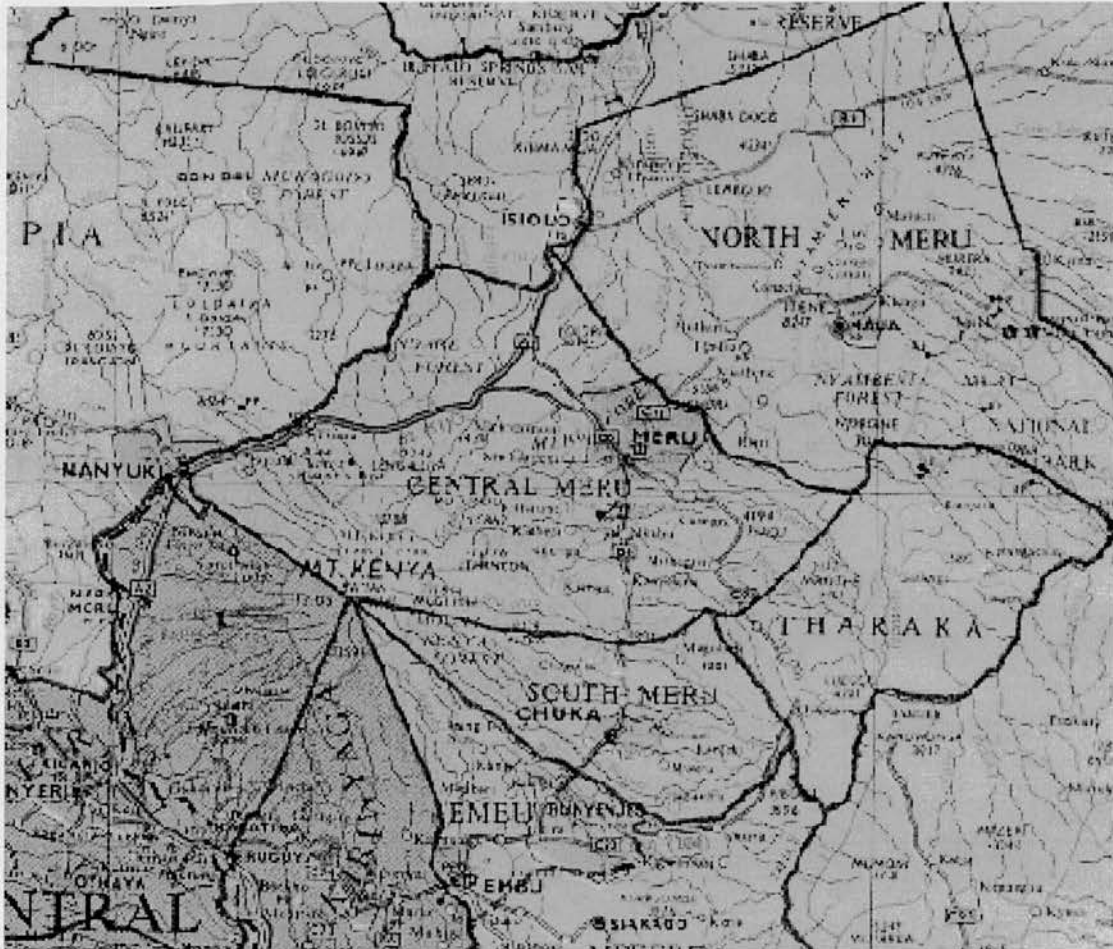
<i>baraza</i>	a public meeting organised by Government
<i>chang'aa</i>	distilled alcoholic drink, 'Nubian Gin'
<i>harambee</i>	ideology of self-help, literally 'pulling together'
<i>kariorkor</i>	the Carrier Corps, a colonial military unit of porters in the 1914 - 1918 war
<i>kipande</i>	the identification card carried by migrant workers, work and travel permit
<i>jitegemee</i>	to fend for oneself, to be an individual and survive
<i>matunda ya uhuru</i>	the 'fruits of freedom', the opportunities of political independence
<i>safari</i>	a journey, usually in the context of Government officials

Map of Meru Central and Meru North Fieldsites (2001-2003)



Appendix C

Administrative Map of Meru, post-1990

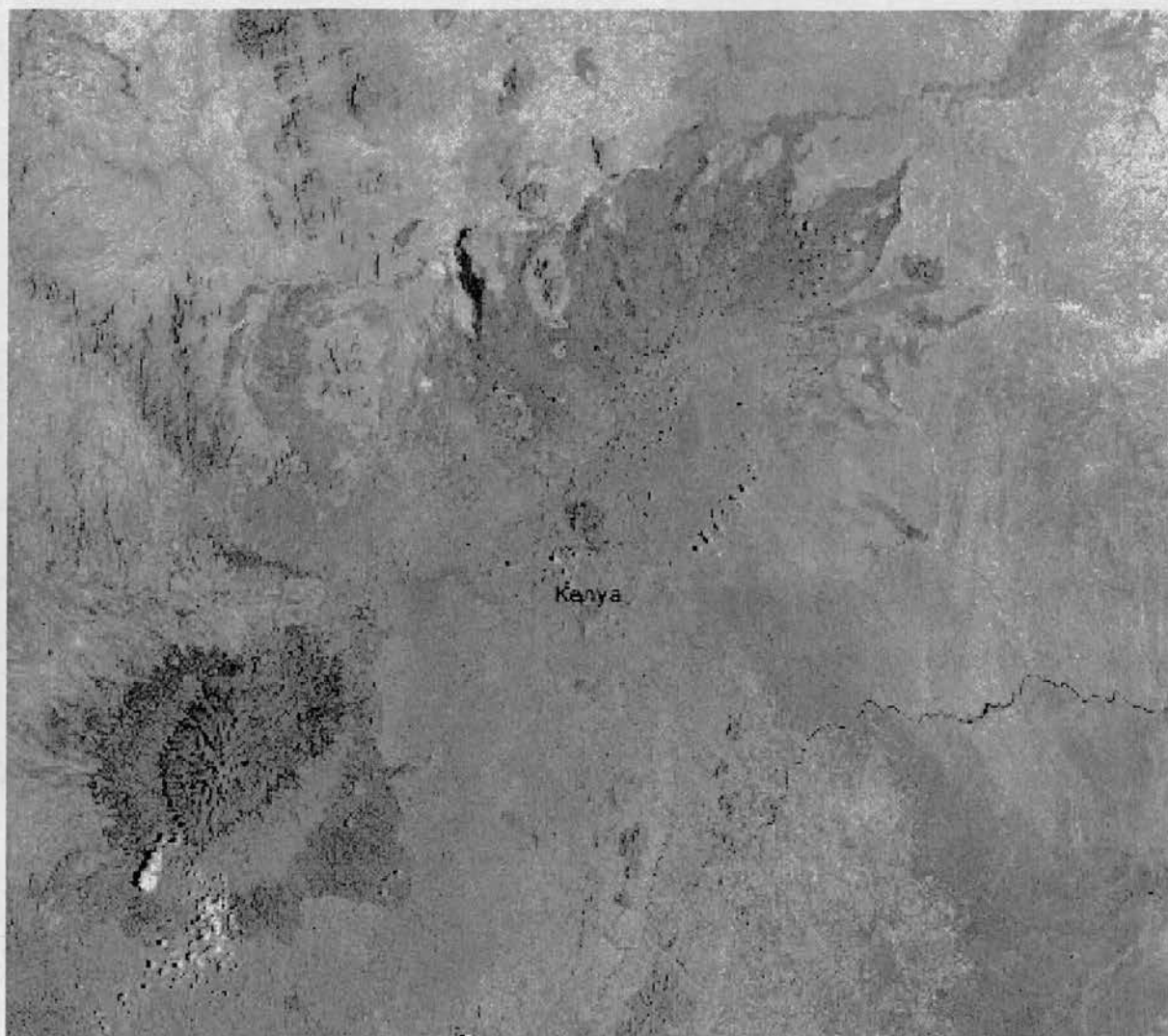


Map 1: Administrative map of Meru Central and Meru North (Adapted from Kenya Provinces and Districts Map, Survey of Kenya, 2000)

Until 1991, when the larger historical Meru District was divided into smaller administrative districts, the north-south limits of the district were Mûtuatî in Meru North to the Thûcî river on the border with Runyejes District (then Embu). Today, Kimeru-speaking peoples live in Meru South, Tharaka-Nithi, Meru Central and Meru North, as well as in today's Laikipia District to the north-west. The principal fieldsites in this thesis may be found between Meru Town (Meru Central) and Maua (Meru North). See Map 2 in Appendix C for topographical details.

Appendix D

Satellite Imagery of Mount Kenya and the Nyambene Range



Map 2: Satellite image of Mount Kenya and the Nyambene Range to the North East (Adapted from GeoCover, Earth Satellite corporation, 2003)

Lighter arable vegetation appear green, with forests noticeably darker. The Nyambene Range, seen as a spike of green to the northeast, acts as a watershed for the drier savannah below. Note the precipitate drop towards the lowlands on Nyambene's western flank. The mountain rising to the direct north is Shaba National Reserve. Meru National Park and Bisanadi National Reserve are divided by the Tana River, which can be seen clearly in the lower eastern quadrant of the image. See Map 1 for corresponding administrative mapping of the region.

Bibliography

Books, dissertations and articles

- Abélès, Marc and Chantal Collard (eds.). 1985. *Age, pouvoir et société en Afrique noire*. Paris: Karthala.
- Aguilar, Mario. 1998. *The Politics of Age & Gerontocracy in Africa: Ethnographies of the Past & Memories of the Present*. Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press.
- Almagor, Uri. 1983. 'Alternation endogamy in the Dassanetch generation-set system', *Ethnology*, Vol. 22, pp. 93-108.
- Ambler, Charles. 1995. 'What is the World Going to Come to?' Prophecy & Colonialism in Central Kenya', in Anderson, David and Douglas Johnson (eds.), *Revealing Prophets: Prophecy in Eastern African History*, pp. 221-239. E.A.E.P: Nairobi; Ohio University Press: Athens; James Currey: London.
- Ambler, Charles. 1989. 'The renovation of custom in colonial Kenya: the 1932 generational succession ceremonies in Embu', *The Journal of African History*, 30, pp.139-156.
- Ambler, Charles. 1988. *Kenyan communities in the Age of Imperialism: The central region in the late nineteenth century*. New Haven: Yale University Press
- Amin, Samir. 1998. *Spectres of Capitalism: A Critique of Contemporary Intellectual Fashions*. New York University Press: New York.
- Amselle, Jean-Loup. 1990. *Logiques métisses. Anthropologie de l'identité en Afrique et ailleurs*. Payot: Paris.
- Anderson, David and Douglas H. Johnson (eds.) 1995. *Revealing Prophets: Prophecy in Eastern African History*. London: James Currey.
- Arkell-Hardwick, Alfred A. 1903. *An ivory trader in northern Kenia (The Record of an Expedition through Kikuyu to Galla Land in East Equatorial Africa, with an account of the Rendili and Burkenjeji Tribes)* London; Longmans Green & Co.
- Bayart, Jean-François. 1993. *The State In Africa: The Politics of the Belly*. Longman: New York.
- Baxter, Paul T. W. and Uri Almagor (eds.) 1978. *Age, Generation & Time: Some*

aspects of East African Age Organisation. London: Hurst.

Berman, Bruce. 1990. *Control and Crisis in Colonial Kenya: The Dialectic of Domination*. James Currey; London.

Bernard, Frank E. 1972. *East of Mount Kenya: Meru Agriculture in Transition*. Munich; Weltforum Verlag.

Bernard, Frank E. 1979. 'Meru District in the Kenyan Spatial Economy: 1890 - 1950', in R.A. Obudho and D. R. F. Taylor (eds.), *The Spatial Structure of Development: A study of Kenya*, pp. 264-290. Westview Press; Boulder, Colorado.

Bernardi, Bernardo. 1985. *Age-Class Systems: Social Institutions and Politics Based on Age*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

Bernardi, Bernardo. 1959. *The Mugwe: a Failing Prophet; A Study of a Religious and Public Dignitary of the Meru of Kenya*. The International Africa Institute; Oxford University Press, London.

Brantley, Cynthia. 1978. 'Gerontocratic Government: Age-Sets in Pre-Colonial Giriama', *Africa*, 3, (48), pp. 248-64.

Carrier, Neil. 2003. *The Social Life of Miraa*, Unpublished PhD Dissertation. Department of Social Anthropology, St. Andrew's University, UK.

Chanler, William Astor. 1896. *Through Jungle and Desert: Travels in Eastern Africa*. MacMillan & Co. Ltd.: London.

Chege, Jane. 1993. *The Politics of Gender and Fertility Regulation in Kenya: a case-study of the Igembe*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, Lancaster University, UK.

Das, Veena. 1995. *Critical Events: An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India*. Oxford University Press: Delhi.

Davison, Jean. 1989. *Voices From Mutira: Lives of Rural Gikuyu Women*. Lynne Rienner; London and Boulder, Colorado.

Dawson, Marc Harry. 1981. 'Disease and Population Decline of the Kikuyu of Kenya, 1890 - 1925'. *African Historical Demography. Proceedings of a Seminar Held in the Centre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh, 24th and 25th April 1981*. Ed. by Christopher Fyfe and David McMaster. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, pp. 121-38.

- Devereux, George. 1967. *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioural Sciences*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Droz, Yvan. 2000. 'Circoncision féminine et masculine en pays kikuyu', *Cahiers d'Études africaines*, **158**, pp.
- Droz, Yvan. 1999. *Les migrations kikuyus. Des pratiques sociales à l'imaginaire*. Neuchâtel, Éditions de l'Institut d'ethnologie; Paris, Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'Homme.
- Dundas, Charles. 1908. 'Notes on the Origin and History of the Kikuyu and Dorobo Tribes', *Man*, Vol. **8** (1908), pp. 136-139.
- Dyson-Hudson, Neville. 1963. 'The Karimojong Age System', *Ethnology*, **2** (3): pp. 353-401.
- Englund, Harri. 1996. 'Witchcraft, Modernity, and the Person: The Morality of Accumulation in Central Malawi', *Critique of Anthropology*, **16** (3), pp. 257-79.
- Fadiman, Jeffrey. 1993. *When We Began, There Were Witchmen: An Oral History from Mount Kenya*. University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles.
- Fardon, Richard (ed.). 1990. *Localising Strategies: Regional Traditions of Ethnographic Writing*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press/Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press.
- Ferguson, James. 1999. *The Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt*. University of California Press: Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London.
- Foner, Anne. 1984. *Ages in Conflict: a cross-cultural perspective on inequality between old and young*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fosbrooke, H.A. 1956. 'The Masai Age-Group System as a Guide to Tribal Chronology', *African Studies*, vol. **15**, no. 4, pp. 188-207.
- Githige, D.M. 1978. 'The Religious Factor in Mau Mau with Particular Reference to Mau Mau Oaths', M.A. thesis, University of Nairobi.
- Glazier, Jack. 1976. 'Generation classes among the Mbeere of Kenya', *Africa* **46**, (4): pp. 313-26.

- Goldschmidt, Walter. 1990. *The Human Career: The Self in the Symbolic World*. Basil Blackwell Ltd: Oxford.
- Goldsmith, Paul. 1994. 'Symbiosis and Transformation in Kenya's Meru District (Agriculture)' Ph.D. thesis, University of Florida-Gainesville.
- Greenhalgh, Susan. 1990. 'Toward a political economy of fertility: anthropological contributions', *Population and Development Review* (16): pp. 85-106.
- Gulliver, P.H. 1958. 'The Turkana Age Organization', *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 60, No. 5. (Oct., 1958), pp. 900-922.
- Hamilton, Carolyn. 1998. *Terrific Majesty: The powers of Shaka Zulu and the limits of historical invention*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Haugerud, Angelique. 1993. *The Culture of Politics in Modern Kenya*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Haynes, Jeff. 1996. *Religion and Politics in Africa*. London & New Jersey: Zed Books.
- Hazel, Robert. 2001. 'Segregating and timing generations: Social organization in Cushitic East Africa and Beyond', *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* (125): pp. 1-37.
- Hetherington, Penelope. 2001. 'Generational Changes in Marriage Patterns in the Central Province of Kenya, 1930-1990', *Journal of Asian African Studies*, 36 (2), pp. 157-80.
- Heyer, Judith and JK Maitha and WM Senga (eds.) 1976. *Agricultural Development in Kenya: An Economic Assessment*. Oxford University Press; Nairobi, Lusaka, Dar es Salaam, Addis Ababa.
- Hodgson, Dorothy. 2001. *Once Intrepid Warriors: Gender, Ethnicity, and the Cultural Politics of Maasai Development*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Holding, Mary. 1942 (a) 'Some Preliminary Notes on Meru Age Grades', *Man*, n.s. 30-31, pp.58-65.
- Holding, Mary. 1942 (b) 'Women's Institutions and the African Church', *International Review of Missions*, no. 31, August, pp. 291-300.
- Jackson, Michael. 1998. *Minima Ethnographica: Intersubjectivity and the Anthropological Project*. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago.

- Kagwanja, Peter. 2003. 'Facing Mount Kenya or Facing Mecca? The *Mungiki*, ethnic violence and the politics of the Moi succession in Kenya, 1987-2002', *African Affairs*, vol. 102, no. 406, January, pp. 25-50.
- Karp, Ivan. 2002. 'Development and Personhood: Tracing the Contours of a Moral Discourse', in Knauff, B.M. (ed.), *Critically Modern: Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies*, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Kawai, Kaori. 1998. 'Women's Age Categories in a Male-Dominated Society: The Case of the Chamus in Kenya', in *Conflict, Age & Power in North East Africa: Age Systems in Transition*, (eds.) Simon Simonse and Eisei Kurimoto. James Currey; Eastern African Studies, London, pp. 147-67.
- Kenyatta, Jomo. 1938. *Facing Mount Kenya*. Secker and Warburg: London.
- Kershaw, Greet. 1997. *Mau Mau From Below*. Eastern African Studies; James Currey: Oxford.
- Kinoti, Cyprian. 1984. *The Kîmûrû Grammar and Idiom*. Nkubu, Kenya (mimeo.)
- Kubai, A. N. 1995. 'The Muslim Presence and Representations of Islam among the Meru of Kenya'; unpublished PhD Dissertation: King's College London, University of London.
- Kuczynski, Robert René. 1949. *Demographic Survey of the British Colonial Empire. Vol. 2: East Africa*. London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Kurimoto, Eisei and Simon Simonse (eds.) 1998. *Conflict, Age & Power in North East Africa*. James Currey, Oxford; E.A.E.P, Nairobi; Fountain Publishers, Kampala; Ohio University Press, Athens.
- Lamb, Sarah. 2000. *White Saris and Sweet Mangoes: Aging, Gender, and Body in North India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lambert, Hugh E. 1956. *Kikuyu Social and Political Institutions*. Oxford University Press: International African Institute.
- Lambert, Hugh E. 1947. *The Uses of Indigenous Authorities in Tribal Administration: Studies of the Meru in Kenya Colony*. Communications from the School of African Studies: University of Cape Town.
- Lamont, Mark. 1999. 'Not Yet Soko Huru: the local appropriation of free market

discourse in the rural coffee industry of Meru, Kenya (1998)'; unpublished MA Thesis: Concordia University, Montréal.

Lamphear, John. 1994. 'The Evolution of Ateker "New Model" Armies', in Fuikui, Katsuyoshi and John Markakis (eds.), *Ethnicity and Conflict in the Horn of Africa*, James Currey: London.

Lamphear, John. 1992. *The Scattering Time: Turkana Responses to the Imposition of Colonial Rule*. Oxford University Press: Oxford.

Lamphear, John. 1989. 'Historical Dimensions of Dual Organisation: The Generation-Class System of the Jie and the Turkana', in *The Attraction of Opposites: Thought and Society in the Dualistic Mode*, Ann Arbor; The University of Michigan Press, pp. 235-54.

Leakey, Louis. 1977. *The Southern Kikuyu before 1903, vol. I-III*. Academic Press: London and New York.

Legesse, Asmarom. 1973. *Gada, Three Approaches to the Study of African Society*. New York: Free Press.

Lewis, Ioan. 1999. *Arguments With Ethnography: Comparative Approaches to History, Politics & Religion*. London & New Jersey: The Athlone Press.

Lewis, Joanna. 2001. *Empire State Building: War and Welfare in Kenya, 1920 - 1952*. James Currey Publishers, Oxford; EASP, Nairobi.

Leys, Colin. 1996. *The Rise & Fall of Development Theory*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington & Indianapolis.

Lonsdale, John. 1995. 'The Prayers of Waiyaki: Political Uses of the Kikuyu Past', in Anderson, David and Douglas Johnson (eds.), *Revealing Prophets: Prophecy in Eastern African History*, pp. 240-291. James Currey: London; E.A.E.P: Nairobi; Ohio University Press: Athens.

Lonsdale, John. 1992. 'The Moral Economy of Mau Mau: Wealth, Poverty, and Civic Virtue in Kikuyu Political Thought', in *Unhappy Valley: Conflict in Kenya and Africa*, bk. 2, *Violence and Ethnicity*, pp. 315-504. Ohio University Press: Athens.

Madsen, Deborah. 1996. *Allegory in America: From Puritanism to Postmodernism*. MacMillan Press Ltd.: London.

- Mahner, Jurg. 1975. 'The Insider and Outsider in Tigania, Meru', *Africa* (45) 4, pp. 400-9.
- Mamdani, Mahmood. 1996. *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Princeton University Press: Princeton.
- Maupeu, Hervé. 2002. 'Mungiki et les élections. Les mutations politiques d'un prophétisme kikuyu (Kenya)', *Politique Africaine*, no. 87, Octobre, pp. 117-138.
- Maupeu, Hervé. 1990. *L'administration indirecte, les méthodistes et la formation de l'identité Meru (Kenya, 1933 - 1963)*. Centres d'Etudes africaines; Ecole Des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales.
- Maybury-Lewis, David and Uri Almagor (eds.) 1989. *The Attraction of Opposites: Thought and Society in the Dualistic Mode*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Mbembe, Achille. 2001. *On the Postcolony*. Berkeley: The University of California Press.
- Mbembe, Achille. 1985. *Jeunes et l'ordre politique en Afrique Noire*. Éditions l'Harmattan; Paris.
- Meyer, Brigit. 1999. *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity Among the Ewe in Ghana*. Edinburgh University Press: International African Institute, London.
- M'Imanyara, Alfred. 1992. *The Restatement of Bantu Origin and Meru History*. Longman Kenya: Nairobi.
- Müller-Dempf, Harald K. 1991. 'Generation-Sets: Stability and Change, with special reference to Toposa and Turkana Societies', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 54, No. 3, pp. 554-567.
- Muriuki, Godfrey. 1974. *A History of the Kikuyu, 1500-1900*. Oxford University Press: Nairobi, Oxford, New York.
- Murray, Jocelyn. 1976. 'The Church Missionary Society and the 'female circumcision issue' in Kenya', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, VIII, pp. 92-104.
- Mwaniki, Kabeca. 1973. *The Living History of Embu and Mbeere*. East African Literature Bureau: Nairobi, Kampala, Dar es Salaam.

- Nagashima, Nobuhiro. 1989. 'Two Extinct Age Systems Among the Iteso', in *Conflict, Age & Power in North East Africa: Age Systems in Transition*, (eds.) Simon Simonse and Eisei Kurimoto. James Currey; Eastern African Studies, London, pp. 227-48
- Njagi, David (and Ngwataniro Self Help Group). 1993. *The Last Mau Mau Field Marshals: Kenya's Freedom War, 1952-1963 and Beyond (Their Own Story)*. Kolbe Press: Limuru, Kenya.
- Nyaga, Daniel. 1997. *Customs and Traditions of the Meru*. East African Educational Publishers: Kampala and Nairobi.
- Nyaga, Daniel. 1986. *Mikarîre na Mîtûûrîre ya Amûûrû: Nteto Chia Bajûûjû Betû*. Heinemann Kenya: Nairobi.
- Nyaga, Daniel. 1973. *Guti Mbiji Itiiri: Yuku Ria Aciari, Nthaka na Aari*. Catholic Printing School, Nyeri.
- Ochieng, William. 1972. 'Misri Legends in East African History', *East African Journal*, pp. 27-31.
- Ogola, Margaret. 1994. *The River and The Source*. Nairobi: Focus Books.
- Onians, Richard Broxton. 1954. *The Origins of European Thought: About the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Patterson, John Henry. 1909. *In the Grip of the Nyika: Further Adventures in British East Africa*. Macmillan: London.
- Peatrik, Anne-Marie. 1999. *La vie à pas conté. Génération, âge et société dans les hautes terres du Kénia (Meru Tigania-Igembe)*. Collection Sociétés Africaines (10): Société d'Ethnologie; Paris.
- Peatrik, Anne-Marie. 1997. 'Du ménage à l'unité domestique. Un décalage fécond entre la démographie et l'ethnographie', In *Ménages et Familles en Afrique. Approches des dynamiques contemporaines*, Pilon, M. et al. (ed.), pp. 31-54. CEPED: Les Études de CEPED 15: Paris.
- Peatrik, Anne-Marie. 1995 (a) 'La règle et le nombre: les systèmes d'âge et de génération d'Afrique orientale', *L'Homme*, **143**, (2), pp. 13-49.
- Peatrik, Anne-Marie. 1995 (b). 'Introduction, Des sociétés aux rythmes du temps',

L'Homme, 143, (2), pp. 7-12.

Peel, David. 1987. 'Progression and recursion in African social thought', in *African Futures*, Conference Proceedings No. 28, Centre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh, 9-11 December, pp. 275-91.

Peristiany, Jean-George. 1939. *The Social Institutions of the Kipsigis*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.

Péron, Xavier. 1995. *L'occidentalisation des Maasai du Kenya. Privatisation foncière et destructuration sociale, Tome II*. Paris: L'Harmattan.

Rapport, Nigel. 2003. 'Culture is No Excuse': Critiquing multicultural essentialism and identifying the anthropological concrete', *Social Anthropology*, 11, 3, pp. 373-384.

Riesman, Paul. 1998. *Freedom in Fulani Social Life: An introspective ethnography*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Rigby, Peter. 1983. 'Time and Historical Consciousness: The Case of Ilparakuyo Maasai', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 25, No. 3. (Jul., 1983), pp. 428-456.

Rimita, David. 1988. *The Njuri-Ncheke of Meru* (Meru, Kolbe Press)

Rosaldo, Renato. 1980. *Ilongonot Headhunting: A Study of Society & History, 1883-1974*. Stanford University Press

Roth, Eric Abella. 1993. 'A Reexamination of Rendille Population Regulation', *American Anthropologist*, (95) 3: pp. 597-611.

Ruel, Malcolm. 2002. 'The Structural Articulation of Generations in Africa', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 165, XLII-1, pp. 51-81.

Schlee, Günther. 2001. 'Regularity in Chaos: The Politics of Difference in the Recent History of Somalia', Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Working Paper No. 18, Halle / Saale.

Schlee, Günther. 1994 [1989]. *Identities on the Move: Clanship and Pastoralism in Northern Kenya*. Gideon S. Were Press: Nairobi.

Shetler, Jan Bender. 2003. 'Interpreting Rupture in Oral Memory: The Regional Context for Changes in Western Serengeti Age Organisation, (1850-1950)',

Journal of African History, 44 (3), pp. 385-412.

- Shetler, Jan Bender. 1995. "A Gift for Generations to Come": A Kiroba Popular History from Tanzania and Identity as Social Capital in the 1980s', *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 28, no. 1, pp. 69-112.
- Simonse, Simon. 1992. *Kings of Disaster: Dualism, Centralism, and the Scapegoat King in Southeastern Sudan*. Leiden: EJ Brill.
- Smith, Daniel Scott. 1999. 'Population and Political Ethics: Thomas Jefferson's Demography of Generations', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., vol. 56, no. 3 (July), pp. 591-612.
- Smith, Gavin. 1997 'Pandora's History: Central Peruvian Peasants and the Re-covering of the Past', in Sider, Gerald and Gavin Smith (eds.), *Between History and Histories: The Makings of Silences and Commemorations*, pp. 80-97. University of Toronto Press; Toronto, Buffalo, and London.
- Spear, Thomas and Richard Waller (eds.) 1993. *Being Maasai: Ethnicity & Identity in East Africa*. James Currey: Oxford; Mkuki na Nyota: Dar es Salaam; E.A.E.P: Nairobi; Ohio University Press: Athens.
- Spencer, Paul. 1997. *The Pastoral Continuum: The Marginalization of Tradition in East Africa*. Oxford University Press: Clarendon Press.
- Spencer, Paul. 1990. 'The riddled course: theories of age and its transformations', in *Anthropology & The Riddle of the Sphinx: Paradoxes of Change in the Life Course*, (ed.) Paul Spencer, pp. 1-26. Routledge: London.
- Spencer, Paul. 1988. *The Masaai of Matapato: A Study of Rituals of Rebellion*. Manchester University Press, IAI, London.
- Spencer, Paul. 1970. *Nomads in Alliance: Symbiosis and Growth among the Rendille and Samburu of Kenya*. Oxford University Press.
- Spitzer, Alan. 1973. 'The Historical Problem of Generations', *The American Historical Review*, vol. 78, no. 5, December, pp. 1353-85.
- Steeves, Leslie. 1997. *Gender Violence and the Press: The St.Kizito Story*. Monographs in International Studies: Ohio University Press.
- Stewart, Frank. 1977. *Fundamentals of Age-Group Systems*. Academic Press: New York.

- Swainson, Nicola. 1980. *The Development of Corporate Capitalism in Kenya: 1918-1977*. London: Heinemann.
- Tadesse, Wolde Gossa. 2000. 'Property and Age Organisation among an East African Pastoralist Group', Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Working Papers, Halle/Salle.
- Thomas, Lynn M. 2003. *Politics of the Womb: Women, Reproduction, and the State in Kenya*. Berkeley: The University of California Press.
- Thomas, Lynn M. 1998. 'Imperial Concerns and 'Women's Affairs': State Efforts to Regulate Clitoridectomy and Eradicate Abortion in Meru, Kenya, c. 1910-1950', *Journal of African History*, **39**, pp. 121-45
- Thomas, Lynn M. 1996. 'Ngaitana (I will circumcise myself)': The Gender and Generational Politics of the 1956 Ban on Clitoridectomy in Meru, Kenya', *Gender & History*, vol. **8**, no. 3, November: pp. 338-63.
- Tornay, Serge. 2001. *Les Fusils Jaunes. Générations et Politique en Pays Nyangatom (Éthiopie)*. Collection Sociétés Africaines (14): Société d'Ethnologie; Nanterre.
- Tornay, Serge. 1998. 'Generational Systems on the Threshold of the Third Millennium: An Anthropological Perspective', in *Conflict, Age & Power in North East Africa*, (eds.) Eisei Kurimoto and Simon Simonse, pp. 98-120. James Currey, Oxford; E.A.E.P, Nairobi; Fountain Publishers, Kampala; Ohio University Press, Athens.
- Turner, Victor. 1967. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Vansina, Jan. 1990. *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa*. The University of Wisconsin Press: Madison.
- Waller, Richard. 2000. 'Age and Ethnography', *Azania*, pp. 91-109.
- Warren, Kay. 2001. 'Indigenous Activism across Generations: An Intimate Social History of Antiracism Organizing in Guatemala', in *History in Person: Enduring Struggles, Contentious Practice, Intimate Identities*, (eds.) Holland, Dorothy and Jean Lave, pp. 63-91. School of American Research Press: James Currey; Oxford.
- Werbner, Richard (ed.) 2002. *Postcolonial Subjectivities in Africa*. London: Zed Books.

- Werbner, Richard (ed.) 1998. *Memory and the Postcolony: African Anthropology and the Critique of Power*. London: Zed Books.
- White, Hayden. 1973. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*. John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore.
- White, Luise. 2000. *Speaking With Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- White, Luise. 1990. *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Whitman, Jon. 1987. *Allegory: The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique*. Clarendon Press: Oxford
- Whyte, Susan Reynolds. 2002. 'Subjectivity and Subjunctivity: Hoping for Health in Eastern Uganda' In *Postcolonial Subjectivities in Africa* (ed.) Richard Werbner, pp. 171-90. London: Zed Books
- Williams, Raymond. 1985. *The Country and The City*. The Hogarth Press: London.
- Williams, Raymond. 1976. *Key Words: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Fontana & Croom Helm: London.
- Yanagisako, Sylvia and Jane Collier (eds.) 1987. *Gender and Kinship: Essays Toward a United Analysis*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Unpublished Manuscripts

- Lambert, Hugh
1941 *The Meru Yet to Come*
 (mimeo.)

Audiovisual, photographs, and illustrations

Audiocassettes

- Akwalû, Gakula Gerevasio
(2000) *Kwîna Thîna and Nî Nkatho Ngocokia Part II*
 Nyambene Gospel Singer; GGA Productions.
- (2003) *Nthukî Îrîa Ncabûka*

Nyambene Gospel Singer; GGA Productions.

Kathuma, Gîtonga
(1977?)

Gitonga Kathuma - Original
Oasis; Cut /1; PO Box 7399; Nairobi.

Kibara, Henry
(2001)

Kidawa and Dady Tycoon, Kibara 3.
Top Kimeru, Meru North Gospel Singers; HKK Productions.

Photographs

Adamson, Joy
(1949, 1950)

Imenti boys before circumcision
A Njuri elder of the Tigania tribe

Anonymous
(1979?)

Studio Portrait of Bakari and Nkatha

Johnson, Martin and Osa
(1928)

Tigania *nthaka* performing *ingala alamal*